

SAVE THE PIXEL



v1.1

The Art of Simple Web Design

Ben Hunt

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Preface: 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

*“Delay always breeds danger
and to protract a great design is often to ruin it.”*

Miguel de Cervantes, 1547 - 1616

It's hard to find information on how to be a designer

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.

For the past 4 years, I've run a site called Web Design from Scratch (webdesignfromscratch.com), where I've published articles and tutorials about the discipline of web design. It has been read by millions of people world-wide.

This book aims to sum up my approach to web design in a series of new tutorials, each illustrated with worked examples where my design team and I redesign a real web site home page. I'll explain the reasons behind all our design decisions, which demonstrate the "Save the Pixel" philosophy in practice.

What 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**.

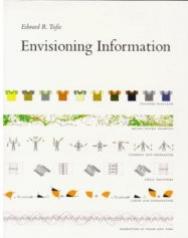
Feeling easy is more important than **being** easy. In a way, it's more real than actual practical ease of use, because we're more likely to persevere and succeed with something we **think** is easy than something that seems a bit more complicated.

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 helped 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, putting it where it's most needed, to manage viewers' attention.

Saving pixels



Edward Tufte has probably explored the visual communication of information more than anyone ever. 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. If you can use one less line, one less dot, one less word, while retaining the meaning, you should.

[For further reading I recommend Tufte's book “Envisioning Information”.](#)

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 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 visitor's 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 coloured box with 4 rounded corners.
- Simpler pages take fewer resources to download, and less bandwidth, so 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.

How to choose what to include & exclude: Occam's Razor

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.

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.

Pro Designer Discipline

"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 finds your site easy and pleasant to use?

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

Design isn't Art.

It's not about 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 skillset, 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. 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: I Hate Clowns

original



Note how much detail there is in the background, how many pixels have been used to decorate the low-value areas of the design.

redesign

The redesign uses far fewer pixels. There's less activity, less to look at. The result is that all the features that are on the page can be stronger and clearer.

While everything is bigger and bolder, the overall effect is easier on the eye.

Intense colour around the edges of the screen draws the eye away from content.

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 short bursts of activity, with multiple cycles of Thinking and Doing.

This helps you to avoid what I call “screen-blindness”. You may recognise the phenomenon if you've ever spent several hours working on a design. The longer you work, the more slowly you seem to get results. 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 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 once you have a clear intent in mind. And you stop when you've implemented what you were going to do. At these points, it's good to walk away and do something else for a short time, then come back and Think again. Then Do. Repeat until done.

Case Study: JBS Partners

JBS Partners is the marketing site of web consultant Jim Spencer.

original

What do you notice first?

The most noticeable thing on the screen is the graphic of the 2 businesspeople walking. This graphic has little informational value, and the colour feels cold & remote.

What do you notice first?

The content of Jim's site suffers from being hard to notice. The text is dominated by the solid blue bar, lines are quite long (which is more tiring to read), and nothing draws the eye to the good information.

redesign

What do you notice first?

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.

What do you notice first?

While everything has been made easier to read, notice how the most useful elements have been given greater relative prominence with increased size.

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.

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.

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 means 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.

“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 3 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, Hagakure ("The Way of the Samurai")

Case Study: 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!

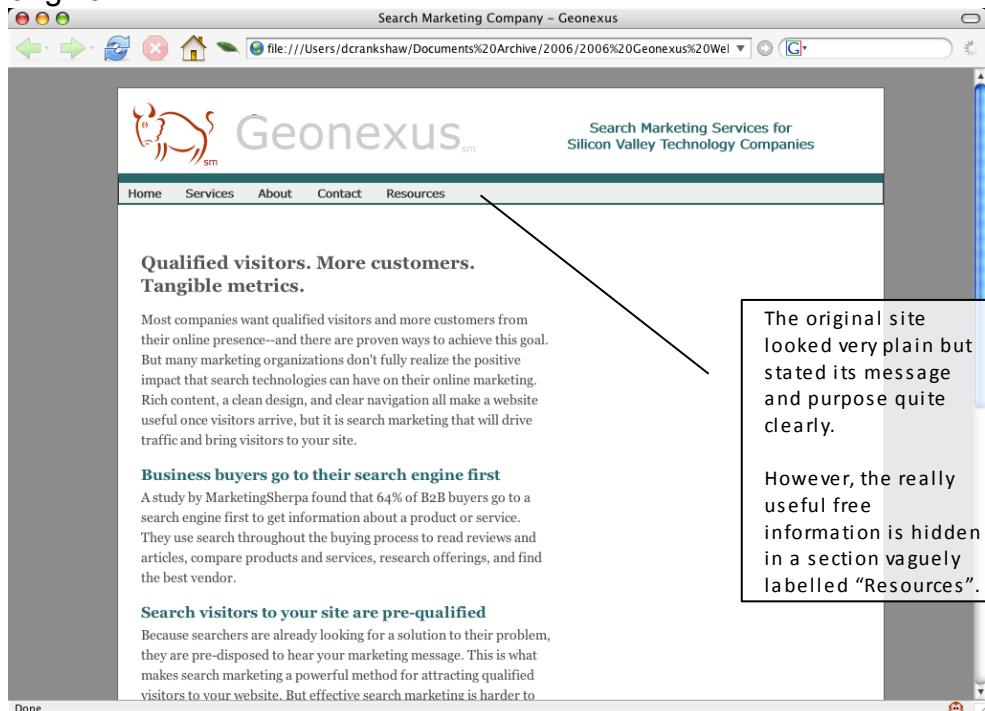
The goal of the web site turned out to be:

“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:

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

original



Split personality

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”.

As a typical male, I know all too well how hard it is to do two things well at the same time! 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!

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, www.searchmarketinghandbook.info, and www.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.

redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Search Marketing Handbook. The header features the title "the Search Marketing Handbook". Below the header is a sidebar with navigation links: Basics, Site indexing, Keyword research, Optimize content, Linking, and Recommended. A search bar is integrated into the sidebar. A call-to-action button "Read the blog Crankshaw on Tech Marketing" with a small profile picture is also present. The main content area contains a welcome message, a summary of the handbook's scope, and a "Topics" section with links to Basics, Site Indexing, Keyword Research, Optimize Content, Linking, and Recommended. A sidebar on the right contains a quote about the site's branding and purpose. A large callout box at the bottom left highlights the ease of understanding the site's offerings.

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

Welcome to the Search Marketing Handbook

This handbook covers all aspects of search marketing, including natural search methods, paid search advertising, and web analytics.

This handbook is intended for marketing and web development teams that want to make it easier for web searchers to find and use what their website has to offer. The techniques in this guide are all dependable for mainstream sites and will integrate well with your other brand and channel building initiatives. They are also consistent with the search engines and what they are looking for: original content, valued earned links, and natural language text.

Topics

Basics
The essential ideas and process for search marketing.

Site Indexing
Make sure the search engines are finding and indexing your entire site.

Keyword Research
Discover the keyword phrases that searchers are using to look for you.

Optimize Content
Page and site optimization.

Linking
Search engines rank pages based on trustworthiness. The best way to be trusted is to have quality sites linking to you.

Recommended
Recommendations for books, blogs, and practitioners that I have learned from.

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: 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.

original

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Alternative Energy Store. At the top, there is a header with the store's logo, a toll-free phone number (877-878-4060), and a slogan: "Making Renewable Energy Affordable™". The main navigation menu includes categories like Educate Yourself, Storefront, Marine, RV & Bus, Camping, Solar Heating, Energy Efficiency, Off-Grid Cabins, and On Grid. Below the menu is a search bar and links for Newsletter Sign-Up, Site Map, Affiliate Program, About Us, Help, and Contact Us. A promotional banner in the center says "30% OFF" for a solar air heating system. To the left, there is a sidebar titled "Product Categories" listing various items such as 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, and Wind Systems. The central content area features a grid of products including inverters, solar charge controllers, and a propane gas refrigerator. On the right side, there are several callout boxes: "Solar & Wind Power Rebates & Tax Credits" (with a link to learn more), "Customer Testimonials" (with a link to see what customers say), "Join the Alt-E Team!" (with a link to current open positions), "Is Wind Power for You?" (with a link to find out if wind power is right for you), and "Learn More..." (with a link to a Beginner's Guide to Solar and Wind Energy).

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.

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.

redesign

the alternative energy store

Featured Products [more »](#)

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

Sun-Mar Excel Non-Electric White Compost Toilet List Price: \$1,397.50 Your Price: \$1,323.00	Kyocera 1.2W 12V Mini Solar Panel Great small panel for solar projects, maintaining battery charge, and more! List Price: \$43.13 Your Price: \$28.84
Frontius TGS100 20.00W Grid-Tie Inverter Open Box Never used, just returned to stock. What a price! List Price: \$3,665.00 Your Price: \$3,116.00	Global Solar 12W 12V Glass Panel Module NSW! Featuring Glass Technology! List Price: \$104.00 Your Price: \$83.36

Products by Category

- Backup Power
- Batteries
- Books, Workshops & Videos
- Cables & Wiring
- Charge Controllers
- Composting
- DC Voltage Converters
- Energy Efficient Products
- Hydropower
- Inverters
- Kits and Package Deals
- Lighting & Fans
- Meters, Communications & Site Analysis
- Open Box / Returned to Stock
- Overshoot, Closeouts & Clearance!
- Power Panels
- Solar Air Heating
- Solar Hot Water
- Solar Panels
- 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

The overall look is much more spacious and clean, which we feel better represents the clean-living brand.

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

Simpler main navigation more accurately reflects the site's brand and goals.

Knowledge and community information also get more prominence on the home page.

On the redesign, we'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.

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.

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: 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 without too much hustle and bustle

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.

Let's 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?

original

The screenshot shows the homepage of Sun Home Communities. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like 'home', 'locate parks', 'buy your home', 'tour the parks', and 'reservations'. Below the navigation is a horizontal menu with links for various parks: 'ambassador downs', 'apache gardens', 'cactus gardens', 'cherokee village', 'park place', 'sundowner', and 'wickiup'. The main content area features a large graphic on the left with a sun icon and the text 'HAVE FUN IN THE SUN THIS WINTER!'. It includes a call-to-action button 'CLICK HERE' and images of people swimming and a house interior. To the right of this graphic is a photo of a street lined with mobile homes and palm trees. Below the photo is a caption 'Sundowner Winter Holiday Party 2004' and a link 'Tour Our Parks In Pictures'. Further down the page, there's a section about the company's ownership of 10 mobile home and RV resort communities, followed by sections for 'Scheduled Activities' and 'Events and Parties'.

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 each of the 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”.

redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of Sunhome Communities. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for "Contact us" and "Site map". Below the navigation is a main content area with a large yellow header box containing the text: "Relax all year round in beautiful Arizona sunshine". Underneath this, there are several text blocks and images. One block says "Sun Home Communities owns and manages 10 mobile home and RV Resort communities throughout the beautiful state of Arizona." Another block says "We have a range of living options to suit active seniors and families." A third block says "At Sunhome parks there are always events, activities and sports to suit everyone." A fourth block says "Every community has great access to shopping, theatres, restaurants and healthcare." A fifth block says "Please tour our parks to find the unique characteristics each one has to offer. We're sure that you'll find a warm welcome." At the bottom of this section is a blue link: "Contact us for more information, or to make your reservation!". To the right of the main content is a sidebar titled "Our parks" which lists ten parks categorized as "Senior" or "Family". Below the sidebar are three buttons: "Map & directions", "Current rental listings", and "Homes to buy". At the very bottom of the page are links for "Home", "Tour the parks", "Buy a home", and "Reservations".

Our parks	
Ambassador Downs	Senior
Cherokee Village	Senior
Park Place	Senior
Sundowner	Senior
Wickiup	Senior
Apache Gardens	Family
Cactus Gardens	Family

- 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 the first-time visitor can use instantly to get a sense of what's on offer.
- The page background and new logo create the feeling of **hot, sunny days**.
- A big **bold header** is the focal point of the page and indicates the start of the main content.
- To help make the page accessible to everyone, we've made all the text contrast strongly with its background, and have made clickable links larger (easier to target with a mouse, even with a shaky hand).

- On the redesign we aimed to make everything bigger and bolder. The body text is bigger. We've made the main navigation bar large and obvious with bigger, easier-to-read text.
- Arranging photos in a more free-form Polaroid-like style gives 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.

Prices aren't displayed on the home page, but 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).

Spread the Smell of Success

*"Dreams, goals, ambitions -
these are the stuff man uses for fuel."*

L. Ron Hubbard

Web sites are symbiotic things. They live by helping their visitors to achieve their goals. They 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: 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

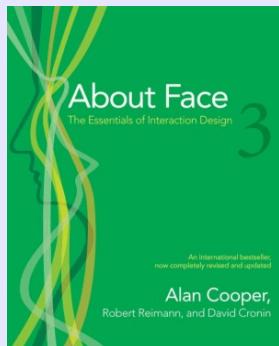
In order to know how to carry your visitors forwards through your site with confidence, you need to understand their goal. What do they want? What are they trying to achieve?

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", now in its third edition.](#)

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. Google's GMail does it differently: it presents targeted advertisements based on the actual content of the email message you're reading.
- 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: 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.

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

original

Free 15-day trial—be up & running today!

Sign up for your [free trial](#) now or read [why buildium](#) is right for you.

buildium
property management solutions

simple
secure
reliable

latest news »

06/15/2007 - [Buildium adds flexible check printing options to online software editions](#)

05/30/2007 - [Buildium introduces EZ Mailer Service to its line of software](#)

03/29/2007 - [Buildium ups the ante for online property management software](#)

02/24/2007 - [Web-based rent collection gains in popularity](#)

See what [our customers](#) are saying about us.

landlord edition™

Manage all your rental properties with Buildium Landlord Edition, a total solution for landlords and renters that helps you increase your cash flow while saving you valuable time.

[more »](#)

property manager edition™

Improve your bottom-line and cut down on time consuming tasks with Buildium Property Manager Edition, a complete online system that streamlines tasks for property managers.

[more »](#)

association edition™

Overcome the challenges that smaller associations face with Buildium Association Edition, a comprehensive solution built with condos and homeowner associations in mind.

[more »](#)

[privacy](#) | [security](#) | [site map](#)

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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.

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. The CTA 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.

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. So property managers have different requirements from landlords and housing associations. Each group would benefit from a more targeted message, which would 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 being the parent of 3 products. But the reality is that, unless visitors are interested in this bigger picture, it doesn’t help because the web site would have to communicate more information than is necessary to get any one particular visitor to their goal.

redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Buildium Property Manager Edition. At the top, the Buildium logo is followed by the text '#1 in online property management'. Below this, the main heading 'Property Manager' is displayed with 'Edition' in smaller text above it. A blue navigation bar contains links for 'Home', 'Features', 'Pricing', 'Testimonials', and 'Start now'. To the right of the navigation, there's a list of features with checkmarks: 'Double-entry accounting', 'Accept & make payments online', 'Track residents, leases & receivables', 'Online accounts for residents', and 'Ability to print checks'. The central content area features a large orange headline: 'No other product gives you such a complete online property management package at such a low price.' Below this, a paragraph explains the software's design for managing properties, mentioning double-entry accounting, bank queues, rent payments, expenses, and check printing. Five icons illustrate these features: a grid of buildings, a ledger, a dollar sign, a checkbook, and two people looking at a house. To the right, a sidebar titled 'In this section' lists 'Second-level page', 'Try visiting here', 'Here's another page with a longer title', 'Our Recommendations', and 'Further reading'. A testimonial from 'R. BUFFOON, PA' is shown in a box: 'For us, being able to pay bills online with Buildium is worth the price on its own!' Below the testimonial is a 'Free Trial' offer with a '15' icon. At the bottom of the page is a footer with links for 'HOME', 'DEMO', 'FEATURES', 'PRICING', 'TESTIMONIALS', 'START NOW', 'BUILDIUM.COM', and 'CONTACT US'.

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.

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

*"Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and
more complex ... it takes a touch of genius -- and a lot
of courage -- to move in the opposite direction."*

Albert Einstein

At this point, 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: Hexagon-training.com

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.

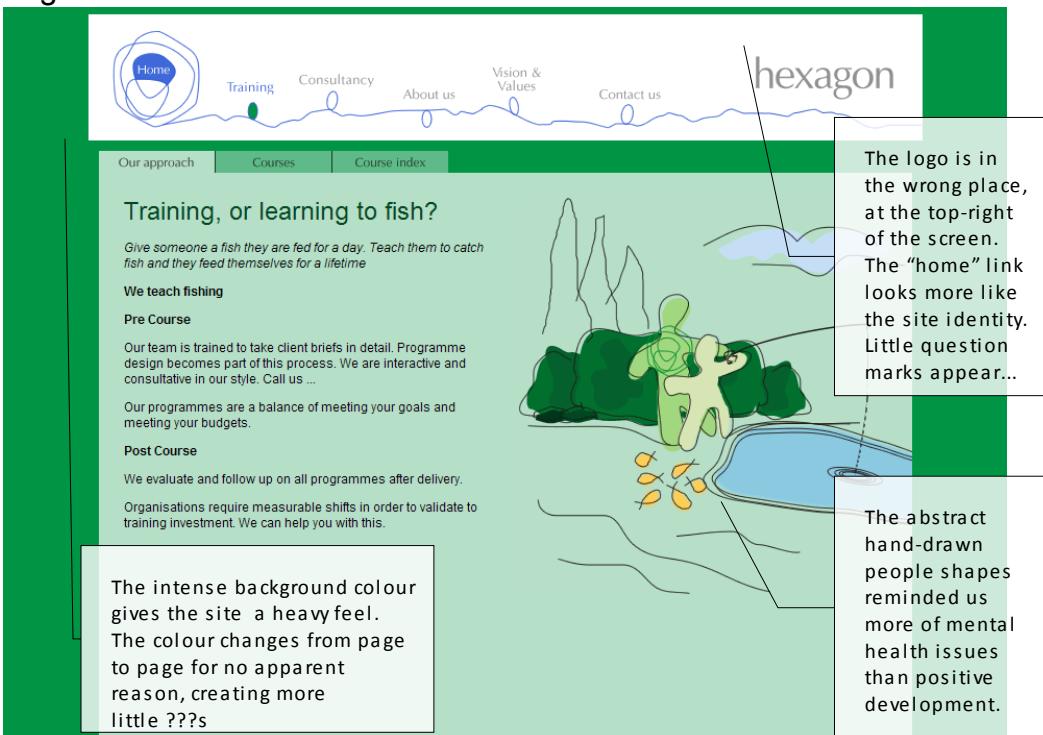
Take the following scenario:

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.

Her 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?

original



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".

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.

State simply what you do

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

redesign

hexagon

Training Resources About Us Contact

Creative training that gets results.

For individuals... for teams... for businesses...

④ Unique Training Courses

Coaching

- Coaching Skills
- 1:1 Coaching
- Specific Coaching Interventions

Coaching Skills

Book Now

Hexagon is being asked more and more to provide training for organisations to develop their own quality in house coaches.

Our standard programme is a three module coaching programme consisting of:

Module 1 - The way of the coach
The focus of this model is "you the coach". Who are you? What experiences, values, strengths and weaknesses do you bring? How do they affect your effectiveness and how do they get in the way of your ability to truly hear what is being said?

Topics Covered:

- Definition of coaching
- The coaching contract and boundaries
- The structure of language
- What are your patterns and how do they impact your Coaching practice?
- The structure of a coaching session
- Formulating the client's outcome

We introduce a teacher of Alexander Technique transparent physiology and voice modulation/presentation for this module.

Module 2 - Coaching Techniques
This module teaches techniques for working with clients.

④ Search for a course

Keyword: team building

Category

- Off the Shelf Programmes
- Teams
- Organisations
- Leadership
- Certified Courses
- All

Search

269 LCU

WY
COLLEGE CREDIT

Tel: +44 (0) 114 276 0807 Email: info@hexagon-training.com

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

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

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.

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: 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.

original

The screenshot shows the VisionProject homepage. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Home, Features, Releases, Demo, Purchase, Support, Login, and About. A tagline "Issue tracking and project collaboration made easy" is displayed above the main content area. Below the navigation, a banner reads "Get your own Issue tracking and Support Center solution, hosted or on-site." It features two boxes: "ISSUE TRACKING" (describing a web-based tool for projects) and "SUPPORT CENTER" (describing an add-on support center). A large central graphic titled "VISIONPROJECT 3.0 IS RELEASED!!!" shows a circular flow of icons representing different user roles: Customer, Project manager, End users, Developer, QA / Test team, and Support team. The graphic is surrounded by several descriptive text blocks: "USED IN OVER 20 COUNTRIES", "EASY TO USE", "AFFORDABLE", "POWERFUL", "CUSTOMIZABLE", "RELIABLE AND SECURE", and "SUPERIOR SUPPORT". To the right of the graphic, there's a testimonial from Neil C. Pennessey, President of Four Mangos, Inc., followed by a "Case study" section. At the bottom left, a sidebar lists various organizations that use VisionProject, such as Software companies, Web design firms, Industrial design firms, Document scanning service companies, Bicycle manufacturers, Ventilation duct manufacturers, Cleaning companies, Non-Profit Organizations, Universities, and more. The bottom right contains a copyright notice for Visionera AB.

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.

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 screenshot shows the homepage of the VisionProject website. At the top, there's a solid blue header bar containing the VisionProject logo, a 'Member Login' link, and 'Forgot Password?' and 'Get Started' buttons. Below the header is a dark blue navigation bar with links for Home, Features, Customers, Releases, Support, Demo, Buy, Blog, and About. The main content area has a blue background with white text. It features a large heading 'Manage projects successfully the agile way!', followed by a bulleted list of benefits: 'Get projects done on time, on target and on budget!', 'Manage all stages in the project lifecycle', 'Track activities/tasks/bugs/requirements with ease!', and 'Handle maintenance and support easily 24/7'. To the right of this text is a screenshot of a software interface showing a calendar and various project management charts. Below the main heading are three callout boxes: 'Features' (with a camera icon), 'Free Trial' (with a star icon), and 'Buzz' (with a speech bubble icon). The 'Features' box contains text about available features and a 'View the feature tour...' button. The 'Free Trial' box contains text about trying the software for free and a 'Start free trial...' button. The 'Buzz' box contains a quote from Björn Broberg, Product manager ITLine Lindab AB, and his contact information. At the bottom left is a section titled 'What's it for?' with text about the software's purpose and how it can be used. On the right is a 'News Blog' section with recent posts and an RSS feed icon.

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.

Getability and the Brand

"It pays to be obvious, especially if you have a reputation for subtlety."

Isaac Asimov

When you arrive at a new web page, there is usually one big hairy question at the top of your mind:

“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?
- 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:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Logo & name● Strap line● Primary navigation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Main page heading● Colour● Imagery |
|---|--|

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



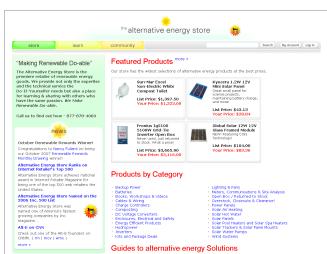
i Hate Clowns' brand

- 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: 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 screenshot shows the Moraware website homepage. At the top is a large, stylized logo with the word "moraware" in lowercase. Below the logo is the strapline "Job Management Software for Fabricators". A navigation menu on the left includes links for Home, JobTracker, How to Buy, Online Demo, What's New, FAQ, News and Events, Customers, and Company. A "Contact Us" section provides toll-free, sales, and support contact information. The main content area features a heading "Save Time. Get Organized." above a sub-headline about JobTracker managing operations. It lists applications like Scheduling, Estimating, Purchasing, Inventory, and Contact Management. To the right is an image of a computer monitor displaying a software interface with various windows and data. A callout box below the monitor states that JobTracker organizes job information for multiple users simultaneously, improving communication and reducing errors. Another callout box suggests checking out JobTracker if a shop handles more than 10 jobs per week to save time. At the bottom, there's a footer note about sending mail to webmaster@moraware.com and copyright information for 2005.

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.

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.

redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of the JobTracker2.0 website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, JOB TRACKER (which is highlighted in red), ONLINE DEMO, FAQS, and CONTACT US. Below the navigation bar, there is a large image of a computer monitor displaying the software interface. To the right of the monitor, there is a photograph of a smiling man in a workshop setting. The text "JobTracker2.0" is prominently displayed in large green and orange letters. Below the title, it says "The complete operations solution for countertop fabricators". A bulleted list of benefits follows: "Used by hundreds of fabricators worldwide", "Increases productivity", and "Saves money". Further down the page, there is a section titled "JobTracker2.0" with a sub-section about helping fabricators save time and costs. It also mentions the software's adaptability and cost-effectiveness. On the left side, there is an image of the software's product box. To the right of the box, there is a table listing various features with corresponding checkmarks. At the bottom left, there is a note about a 90-day money-back guarantee, and at the bottom right, there is a graphic for the "90 DAY MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE".

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 you may not be aware were "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.

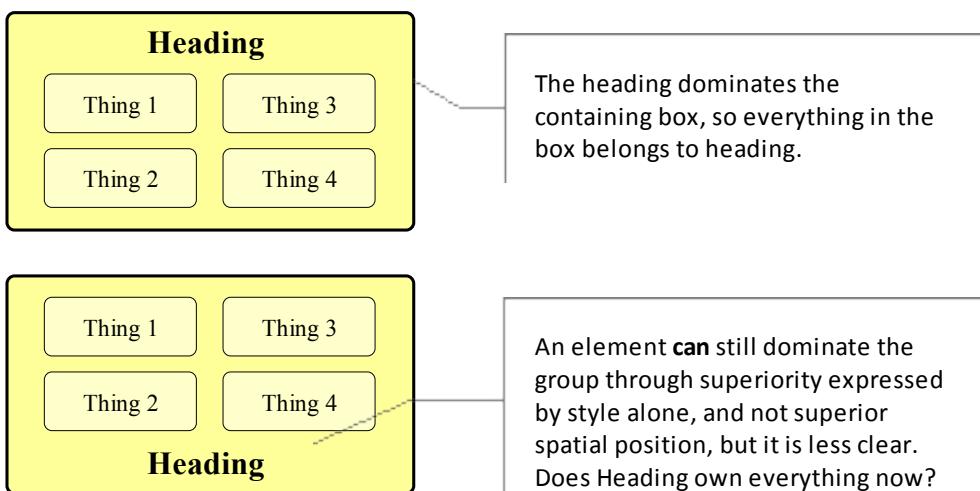
Take some examples:

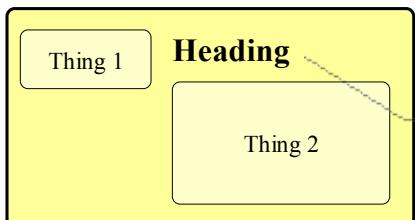
- The site identity (name, logo, strap line etc.) is **about** the whole site, so nothing should go above it. (Same with newspapers.)
- The main global navigation is higher-level than the page sections, a page **belongs** to one of the sections, and all the sections **belong** in the main nav, so the 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**.

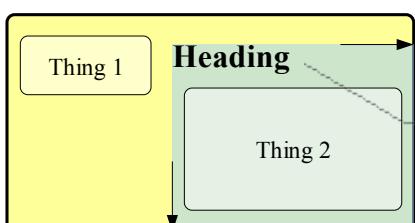
Ownership and Containment

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.

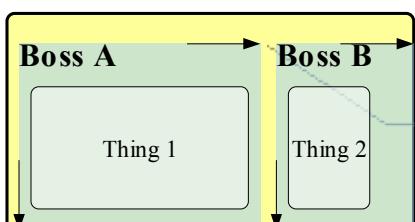




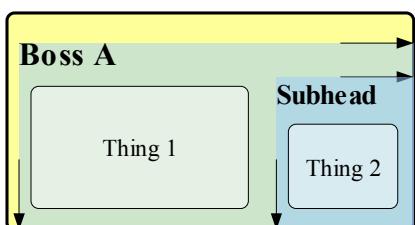
This heading owns Thing 2 (through spatial superiority), but it does not own Thing 1, because it does not have spatial superiority over Thing 1.



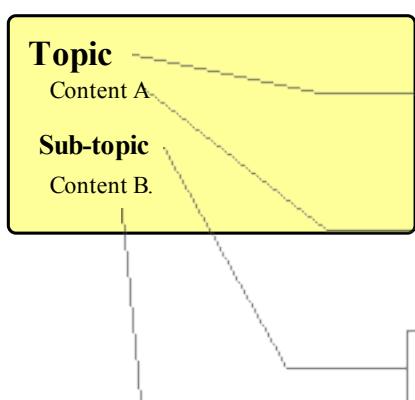
The box trick
Imagine an invisible box extending from the dominant element (Heading) to its right and downwards. Anything inside the box belongs to Heading.



But the box **stops** if it hits another element with equal or greater prominence (Boss B is on the same level as Boss A)



Here, Subhead (and all its children) belong to Boss A, because its box is also contained within Boss A's box



Visual style plays a part. Topic is the top-level element, so everything below belongs to it (everything is in its box).

Content A belongs to Topic, but not to Sub-topic, because it is spatially superior.

Sub-topic belongs to Topic, but not to Content A (it is superior in size)

Content B belongs to both Topic and to Sub-topic, but not to Content A (they are peers in size/style).

This example also shows indenting to reinforce ownership. Lower levels of elements are indented progressively further.

Indenting is just another way of doing the box trick.

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: 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 original layout of the IP Newsflash website. It features a header with the site's name, a navigation bar on the left, and several content columns in the center. The navigation bar includes links for Home, More News, More Notices, More Caselaw, Legal Service, Patent Family, aEPC, EBACS, All Feeds, IP Books, Directory, Top 50 Links, Mobile Edition, SimpleView, Tell a Friend, Register, and Newsletter. The main content area is divided into several sections: Latest News, Notices of the Offices, Ads by Google, Featured Book, and Patent Family Search. Each section contains text and small images. The overall design is functional but lacks visual hierarchy and differentiation between content types.

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.

redesign

The screenshot shows the redesigned IP Newsflash website. The top navigation bar includes 'Log in', 'Register', 'Google Search', and a search bar. A 'strap line' box highlights the addition of a strap line above the main content area. The left sidebar features a blue header 'Home', followed by a vertical menu: 'News', 'Notices' (selected), 'Caselaw', 'Books', 'Feeds' (with a cursor icon pointing to it), 'Customize', 'Mobile', 'Top Links', 'Simple View', 'Submit News', 'Content For Your Site'. Below this is a green 'Tools' section with links to 'Patent Family', 'EBACS', 'aEPC', and 'Directory'. Further down are orange boxes for 'About IP Newsflash', 'Contact Us', and 'Register', and a yellow 'Support this site' box with a sunflower icon.

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Notices**: A box containing news items such as 'Insolvenzverwalter optimistisch über Patentsituation 06/10 15:10' and 'Microsoft schützt Verpackung 06/10 14:10'.
- Caselaw...**: A box listing legal cases from various patent offices like CH, EPO, JPO, WIPO, and USPTO.
- Patent Office Notices...**: A box listing notices from CH, EPO, JPO, WIPO, and USPTO.
- Top Links...**: A box listing links to websites like www.ipmenu.com, www.sims.berkeley.edu, www.dailyratation.com, www.markenblog.de, and patentlaw.typepad.com.
- Patent Family Search**: A box with a search input field and a 'Search' button. It includes instructions for entering publication numbers and information about OpenPatentServices.

On the right side of the main content area, there are several boxes for advertisements:

- Patenting Your Ideas**: 'Protect your idea before someone else does! Get free information now...'
- Help from Trevor Baylis**: 'Protect your idea with advice on patents, design, and markets...'
- Intellectual Property**: 'Escrow Services and Domain Name Management from Iron Mountain...'
- Intellectual Property Law**: 'Experienced US Attorneys, Trademarks, Patents Copyrights...'

At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with links to 'Legal Disclaimer', 'Impressum', 'Feedback', and 'Copyright 2006'.

Added a strap line

Colour-coding on main navigation differentiates sections and tools

Native page content sits straight on the white background. Everything in boxes is "visiting from elsewhere".

We've kept blue as the main colour for content headings, but increased text size to facilitate scanning, and applied subtle background images to add richness and increase appeal.

Simpler 2-column main layout can also break into 3 columns to accommodate ads, but main content column is always widest.

This heading for a tool uses the colour scheme from the nav.

Case study: 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 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 a user profile for 'Ben Hunt' on the Red Abierta Madrid network. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for 'home', 'profile', 'friends', 'gallery', 'messages', 'groups', and 'find'. Below the navigation, there's a large profile picture of Ben Hunt. To the right of the picture, his name 'Ben Hunt' is displayed above the text 'on the Red Abierta Madrid network'. Below this, it says 'Born 34 years ago, and you live in Chesterfield.' There's a small edit link next to the birth date. To the right of the profile picture, there's a box containing links to 'View my friends (4)', 'View my pictures (7)', 'View my groups (0)', and 'View my messages (1)'. Further down, there's a 'News' section with a single item: 'nosUni y Navarra en la radio'. Below that, there's a 'messages' section showing a message from 'nosUni: David Iglesias quiere ser tu ...' posted '45 days ago'. To the right of the messages section is a 'Fotos recientes de amig@s' (Recent photos from friends) section which currently says 'No Friends Yet'. At the bottom of the page, there 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.

This layout demonstrates classic containment. 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 related to "Amigos". The profile name and picture are equivalent in superiority. The 2nd row of tabs are clearly "children" relating to the profile.

redesign

The screenshot shows a redesigned profile page for Ben Hunt. At the top, there's a navigation bar with tabs: INICIO, PERFIL, AMIG@s, FOTOS, MENSAJES, and GRUPOS. The 'AMIG@s' tab is currently selected. Below the navigation is a green header bar containing Ben's profile picture, name ('Ben Hunt'), location ('Red Abierta Madrid'), and age ('34 años - Chesterfield, UK'). To the right of this is a search bar and a 'PERFIL' button. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- estudios**: Lists education details including University (Sheffield), Major (Communication), Year (Ex-alumn@), School (Mulhacen (Granada)), City (San Sebastián / Granada), and Languages (Español English Français Deutsch).
- personal**: Lists hobbies and interests including Relationship (Casad@), Internet, guitarra y cantar, gym, Peak District, England, Sydney, Australia, Red Sea, Music favorite (Loads of different music, especially folk, trance, hip hop.), and Movies favorite (Fight Club, Last Temptation of Christ, Lord of the Rings...).
- grupos a los que pertenezco**: Shows membership in Negresco, chucherío, Grupo montaña EEPP S.Fernando.
- información de contacto**: Shows contact information including Etc. Etc.

On the right side of the page, there are three main sections:

- amig@s**: A box showing a grid of small profile pictures with a '+7' indicator.
- icebrg**: An advertisement for 'icebrg web forms made chillingly simple' featuring a blue wave graphic.
- fotos recientes**: A box showing a grid of recent photos with a '+21' indicator, categorized into 'Mas nuestras', 'Joder con las nuestras', 'Con su parejita', and 'Mis pies'.

At the bottom of the page are links for 'Descripción', 'Anúnciate', and 'Contáctanos'. There are also buttons for 'enviar mensaje' (send message) and 'invita amigos' (invite friends).

The 2nd column contents are arranged in simple boxes with headings. The meaning of each box is clear (if you know Spanish).

The main contents are arranged using only white space (no boxes), but use text size and colour together with spatial superiority to relay meaning.

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 goal to make the process of moving through a web site unambiguous, easily guessable and requiring minimal thought.

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 actually does **three** functions:

1. It 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. It helps you know what **options** you have: where you can go, and what you can do, from here.
3. It 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.

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.

What options to show

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 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)
- Search (it's nav too)

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: HotFrog – Add Your Business

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

I recently redesigned part of a web site for a client, where companies could 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 or optimise the completion rate.

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.

original

The screenshot shows the original 'Add Your Business' form on the HotFrog website. At the top left is a red 'Click here' button with the text 'Create Your Own Free Business Listing!' and a 'FREE' badge. The top right features the 'hotfrog' logo and the text 'Your Australian Business Directory'. A search bar with 'What >>' and 'Where >>' fields, along with a 'Search' button, is positioned below the logo. The main form area has a dark grey header with the title 'Add Your Business' and a sub-instruction 'Please enter your business details below'. Below this is a grid of input fields for 'Business Name', 'Street', 'Suburb/Town', 'State', 'Postcode', 'Phone', 'Fax', 'Business Email', and 'Business Website', each marked with a mandatory star. To the right of the form is a light grey sidebar with the heading 'STEP 1 of 5'. It contains a bulleted list: 'Adding your business to HotFrog', a note about street addresses, a note about email privacy, and a link to the 'Privacy Policy'. At the bottom of the sidebar is a note about product and company locality indexes. The footer includes 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.

The identity is in the top-right corner, reducing getability because we all look 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?

Hint text is easy to ignore to the right hand side of the form. 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 a feedback control that said “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 is 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 screenshot shows a web form titled "hotfrog Add Your Business". At the top right, there is a note: "★ = required info". Below the title, a red header says "A few more details". The form contains several input fields with validation stars: "Business name" (filled with "Jake's Snakes"), "Street" (filled with "14 Tequila Mockingbird Way" with a note "Either street address or PO box" to its right), "Suburb / Town" (filled with "Butch Harbour"), "State" (selected "NSW" from a dropdown menu), "Postcode" (filled with "SY3239"), "Phone number" (filled with "234 567 8910"), "Fax" (empty), and "Web site" (filled with "http://jakes-snakes.com.au/"). At the bottom, there are two buttons: "Back" (green) and "Continue" (red). Below the buttons is a link "Quit & go back to main site ▲". At the very bottom, 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.

How many 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 should mark out mutually-exclusive categories or consciously create a grid (e.g. Market segments x price levels). To be clear, guessable, mutually-exclusive or offer multiple routes to same thing (still guessable, many scents!)

So think carefully about the items they 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 only do that if it’s appropriate for meeting visitor or site goals. If your goals are clear and the steps to achieve them are worked out, you should have no redundant pages.

Beware of 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 ([see the Alternative Energy Store case study](#)).

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)

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.

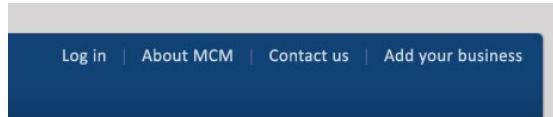
It's also good to get the most meaningful word at the front of your link, which is very often the verb. So "Order brochure", "Cancel request", and "Back" are all fine.

Never put "Click here for..." or "Click here to..." because it adds pixels and pushes the meaningful words away. If you've made your nav clear, "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. Here's a preview of the redesign we 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 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.



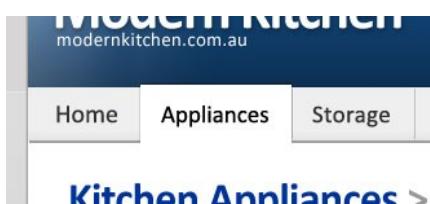
A classic breadcrumb, showing the current position in the scheme of things (normally positioned above the main heading in smaller text).



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

Tabs

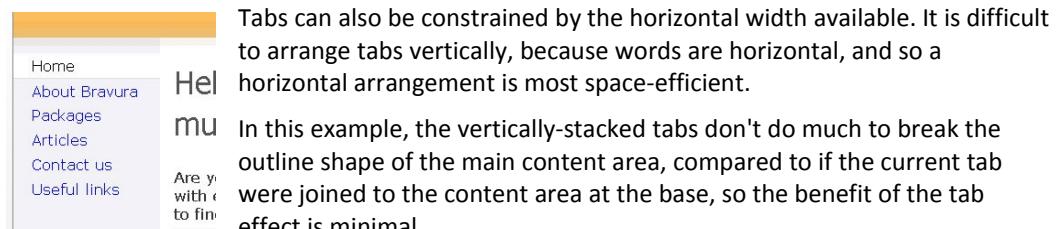
Tabs work very well in the correct context, when they look and work like real tabs in stacking files. The current file is the one at the front of the stack, which then opens to contain documents.



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? 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, 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 at the base, so the benefit of the tab effect is minimal.

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.



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 from Vision Project 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. That doesn't just go for buttons that are actually form elements, but also for graphics that look like buttons, through the use of 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 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).

Others

The navigation styles I've already described probably account for 99% of navigation out there. There are more specialised and customised methods of navigation, including using form controls like dropdown 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, from fredericksicecreams.co.uk uses realistic graphics to represent each section, which have very low colour levels and become bright on mouseover.



This design 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.



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 had “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 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.

Sometimes, I'll only go halfway and make the text 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.



Here's a very original navigation bar with irregular shapes.

But 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).

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.

I usually prefer not to have the underline in the normal state, as it makes 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.

Case Study: 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 main navigation is way over here, entirely separated from the content.

You should never need to say "Click here" as a nav item should clearly be a nav item.

What do you notice first? Lots of dark blue, which feels depressing.

redesign

Scanning the main navigation gives you clues about the brand.

Providing a search form on the home page gives a strong scent and encourages visitors to try it.

Clear heading and intro say what the site does and how.

"Newest members" makes the site feel active.

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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

*“When I'm working on a problem,
I never think about beauty.
I think only how to solve the problem.
But when I have finished,
if the solution is not beautiful,
I know it is wrong.”*

R. Buckminster Fuller

Your visitor's attention is a valuable resource. It 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.

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.

Balance

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.

How much do you need? Enough, and no more. This applies to everything.

Principles for attracting attention

The main visual techniques at your disposal for managing attention are:

- Size
- Contrast
- Boldness
- Colour
- Space
- Illusion of 3D
- Movement

I'll explain each one of these techniques through examples.

Size

Obviously, making something bigger makes it more noticeable.

How much bigger does something have to be? Depends on how much more noticeable you want it to be. Make things as big as they need to be. Try to make only the most relevant things bigger.

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.

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 interpret. 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.

Add section

Add product

Add Section

Add Product

Size compounds all the 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 use this to fine-tune the balance of noticeability. Sometimes, I find myself dropping the size of a piece of text after making it bold in order to keep the overall harmony of the section.

Contrast

The 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

Boldness

Emboldening text (or shapes or lines) makes them stand out more against less bold elements.

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.

Here's the same example as above, but with bold text instead of normal-weight. All the text is more noticeable.

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

Franklin Gothic

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

However, when you get into the thickest lines – black and super-black weights – and the lines can become thicker than the negative spaces between them, which can result in something more like a solid shape with thin lines cut out. While the overall contrast effect can be more attractive to the eye, text itself can be less readable.

Colour

Bright colour draws the eye, but only when it is brighter than the things around it.

If your whole design is a bright mixture of colour, then colour won'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.

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.

It's good practice not to rely on colour differentiation alone to enhance noticeability (for example, putting a red heading on a green background). Make sure your design works with all the colour removed, relying on tonal contrast alone.

Of course, colour can convey a lot of information, as well as being a tool to add noticeability. Different colour combinations create different moods. There are whole books written on the subject of colour, and it's impossible to do more than scratch the surface in a general book.

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

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

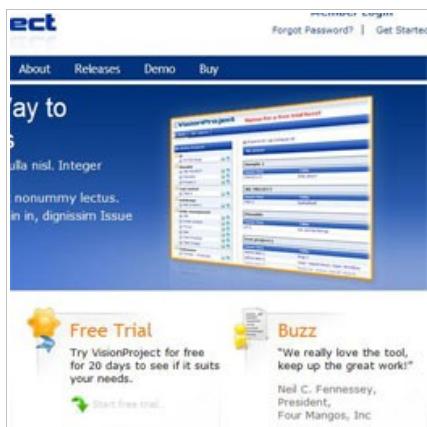
I nearly always use white for the content area because it's easy on the eye and shows black text sharply. Black text on white scores as one of the most readable combinations in tests (black on yellow is theoretically clearer, but it's a bit nasty to look at). White against a black background is just 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.

If you block out your main areas of real estate in colour, maybe just using square shapes and the fill tool, 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).

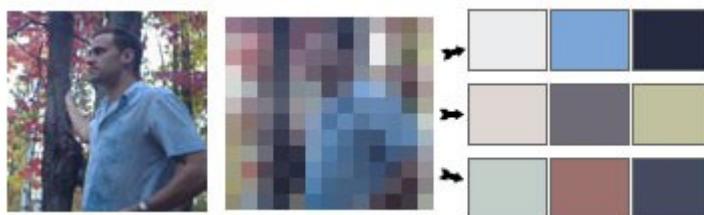
If a highlight colour is going to stand out, it will normally need to be drawn from near the opposite side of the colour wheel to your main base colour.

On our redesign for VisionProject, we used orange to highlight against the predominantly blue site.

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.



Space

An element needs a certain amount of space around it in order to be recognisable. If you've been economical with elements and pixels, there should be 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. There's an entire chapter on this coming up.

3D Illusion

We're drawn to things that appear real, like shiny buttons with a drop shadow that seem literally to "stand out" from the page.

The icons below come from a collection of hundreds in the amazing "Crystal Clear" set by [Everaldo Coelho](#). Please check it out on [Wikimedia Commons](#), it's licensed under LGPL, and do send the designer a donation if you use the icons commercially.



Don't these just make you want to reach out and touch them? Partly, it's the soft, rich colours that gives the positive feel, but something else the icons share is a credible illusion of being solid 3D objects that both push out of the page towards you, and also appear tangible.

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).

Some shapes, like strong diagonals, can also create a **sense** of dynamism, which also draws and directs the eye. Because of its power, movement should be used only when it's absolutely necessary.

Also 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?

“Ignorability”

Remember that structural elements also have an **ignorability** factor. The main content area (which you'd expect to change on every page) is less easy to ignore.

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 stronger areas, without unbalancing the layout. So 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.

Manage noticeability down the 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 consume various sections 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 initial stage, the mode is definitely 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 brand 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 macro level. Then we'll look for clues that indicate right section of the page where we'll most likely find what we're looking for, or the next link.

As we move progressively down the informational hierarchy, and move through pages, away from the generic to the more specific, the mode of interaction may also 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, as we home in.

Down in body text, lower-level headings (h2, h3, h4) get progressively smaller, which is fine, because here the visitor is probably leaning further forward and looking more closely. So bigger, bolder signs would risk overloading the senses. Down here, we're looking more carefully for specific information, so bold words etc. stand out just fine.

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 needs to be (and no more).

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.

Case study: Boldchat.com

From a first look at the Boldchat site, what stands out first? What might Boldchat offer you?

original

Want to thrill your customers?
Simply engage.

"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.

See Boldchat in action now!

See how our [live chat](#) solution can increase your sales and improve your customer service.

[SEE A DEMO NOW >](#)

Live Chat Solutions	Live Chat Editions	The Boldchat Difference
<p>Increase Your Sales MORE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Reduce shopping cart abandonmentIncrease customer confidenceInitiate chats with visitors <p>Improve Your Support MORE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Better leverage staffBe available for instant answersSend prepared answers	<p>Basic Edition MORE Live chat & visitor monitoring with essential features.</p> <p>Pro Edition MORE Adds auto-invites, secure chats, search, reports, etc.</p> <p>eCRM Edition MORE Adds ability to manage contacts, emails, and tickets.</p> <p>...or signup for our Free Account.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Starting at less than \$25/moDiscounts available30 day money back guaranteeNo contracts, no setup feesSetup in just a few minutesLive support available 24x799.9% uptime guaranteeHighly customizable

Boldchat v4.60 Is Now Available

Adds the ability to survey visitors after the chat, option to generate reports in XLS and CSV formats, ability to add/remove attachments from emails, and more. Click [here](#) to upgrade to Boldchat v4.60!

[About Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Affiliate Program](#) | [Contact Us](#)
[Chat with Us](#) | Call Us Toll Free: +1 866 753 9933 | Email Us: info@boldchat.com
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The page is quite pleasant to look at, with the appealing 3 leaf shapes created by the coloured yellow, green, and blue areas. 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 lady, but there's no content value to that picture.

There is quite a lot of content, which makes sense if you read it, but nothing's saying "read me first".

The headings 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, which is a simple thing. This could be off-putting.

The real challenge with this product is how to deal with its great breadth. It's a technological 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

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.

These four feature blocks add further visual interest and highlight a range of selling points.

Two large blocks address two high-level groups of Boldchat clients. They have less colour, to help the orange and blue above draw the eye more initially.

Simple main navigation lets you know where you are and what's here.

We designed this 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.

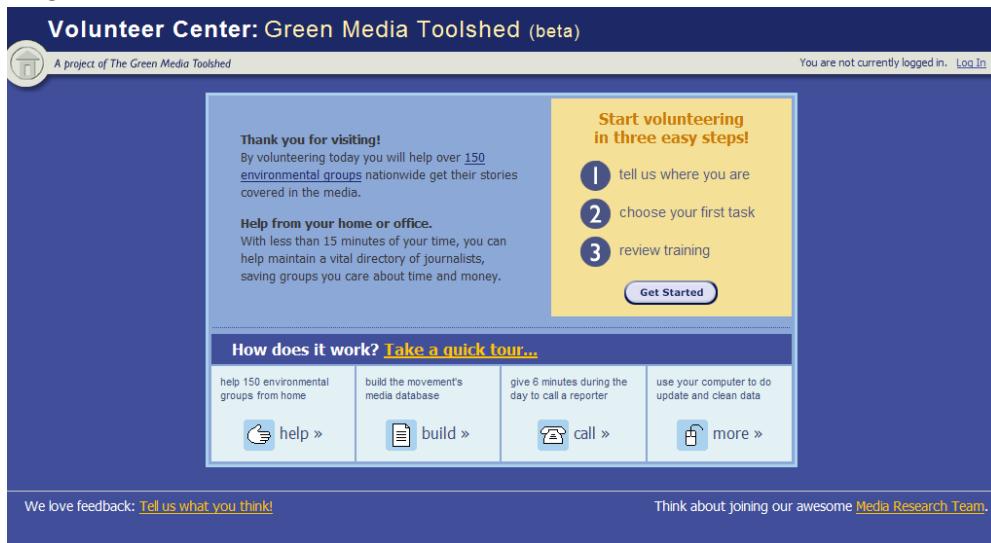
Further down the page, contrast and colour are reduced. The testimonials keep the content variable, and include a range of useful terms for the benefit of search engines (as all the other content on the page is graphical).

Case study: 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.

original



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.

The simplicity of the original site makes the content work quite effectively. The points "1, 2, 3" feel easy, and there's one nice "Get Started" button, which is an obvious next step on the scent trail.

Note the "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

- **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 also 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.

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/starting 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). These three colours have similar levels of saturation (colour intensity) and luminosity (light/dark), which makes them similarly bright and appealing, but they come from different points on the colour wheel.

redesign

The screenshot shows the redesigned Media Volunteer Center website. At the top, there is a header with the logo 'media volunteer center' and a subtext 'a project of the Green Media Toolshed'. Below the header is a large green banner with the text 'Help over 150 environmental groups nationwide get their stories covered in the media'. The main content area is white and features several sections:

- How you can help**: A section with the heading 'Helping is easy!' and a subtext explaining that users can start helping to build and maintain the media directory now. It includes a call-to-action to click on tasks.
- Check for duplicate addresses**: A screenshot of a form showing multiple entries for 'The Buffalo News' with different addresses. Buttons for 'Skip', 'Mark as Duplicates', and 'No Duplicates' are visible.
- Find websites for outlets**: A screenshot of a search interface for 'Washington Nurse Magazine' with details about the publication and a 'Search Google' button.
- Call a reporter**: A screenshot of a card with contact information for 'Tom Pratt at Whatcom County' including his name, title, phone number, and address.

At the bottom of the page, there are footer links for '© Media Volunteer Center 2006', 'Log in | Register', and copyright information for Ben Hunt 2008.

Case study: Fidelica

Fidelica.com is a tech company that designs and makes unique fingerprint sensors. Looking at the original home page, what do you notice first?

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.

There's a graphic alongside the body text illustrating a fingerprint detection technique. This is quite accessible, and at least the shape keeps the eye on the screen, but the image itself isn't 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

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.

original

The screenshot shows the original Fidelica website layout. At the top left is the Fidelica logo with the text "FIDELICA | microsystems". To the right is a strapline "The world lies within your touch." with a small graphic of a hand pointing towards a globe. Below the header is a navigation bar with links: Home, About Us, Technology, News, Information Center, Employment, and Contact Us. The main content area features a large image of a fingerprint with a blue line and dots highlighting specific ridges. To the right of the image is a block of text: "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. 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 fulfilment, for dramatically reduced hardware costs and maximum profitability. Fidelica's thin film-based sensors ensure absolute authentication using ground-breaking biometric technology." Below this is a "What's New" section with two items: "Fingerprint Authentication White Paper" and "Introducing Fingerprint Authentication Performance". At the bottom are sections for "Press Releases" and "Headlines".

Our redesign aims to communicate the high quality of Fidelica's cutting-edge solution. So we'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.

We've encased all the content within a central panel, which can help contain 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.

We 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.

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.

redesign

The screenshot displays the Fidelica Microsystems website with a dark-themed header and a central content area. The header features a dark bar with the Fidelica logo and the word 'microsystems'. Below it is a navigation menu with links for HOME, TECHNOLOGY, PRODUCTS, ABOUT US, and CONTACT US. The main content area has a dark background with a central white column. On the left side of the column, there is a placeholder image of a smart card with text and a signature, accompanied by the text 'May contain copy...'. The right side of the column contains a heading 'Fidelica Microsystems' and several paragraphs of text in a light color. At the bottom of the page, there is a dark sidebar with a heading 'In this section' and a list of links, followed by a 'Jobs' section with a list of positions.

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

Case study: Loving Arms learning center

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.

original

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.

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 selling the benefits of the center.

redesign

Give me space

“What I dream of is an art of balance.”

Henri Matisse (1869 - 1954)

Space is critical in a design. But how much is *enough* and *no more*?

Fortunately, there's a simple golden rule that you can apply to everything in web design, which will help you make every layout feel more natural, balanced, and easy on the eye.

Space between elements is vital for recognition
If everything is close together then nothing stands out at all

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.

Yet if you use space every thing
out too much hit also becomes
difficult to make sense of it

When we group elements through proximity, we're using space. Grouping is a great universal way of assigning meaning. 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.

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, getable layout.

The rule is:

The spatial proximity between elements should be proportional to how closely the elements are related

This means that elements that are closely related to each other should be positioned closer together than they are to other elements.

Now, there are upper & lower boundaries to this rule

1. 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.
2. There is 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.

You can see how this logic works in the example of plain body text.

Working up the hierarchy...

- **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 2/3 of a letter's width apart, which is more than the spacing between letters.
- **Lines** are spaced further apart than words (typically 1 letter's 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.
- **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 getable 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

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 relative to the size of the object**.

This relates to the *scale of focus* that I mentioned regarding size & noticeability. In the first few milliseconds when faced with a new page, you're "getting" the real estate – what's where. So you're looking at headings, navigation items, and content imagery. Larger elements, being viewed on a larger scale, clearly merit a bit more space.

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 3 and 12, try Active Allowance a try now - with no obligation!

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 fabellentesque.

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.

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.

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.

It's better to separate elements 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.

With 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 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 more noticeable using the same amount of space (or I could have kept the text the same size and used less space).

I don't advocate throwing away all boxes and lines, and relying on space exclusively. You 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: Bokahotell.se

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. But it would be better 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.

On the redesign we increased the gap above and below the text to about ½ of a letter. It's a subtle increase in space, but makes a significant difference.

On the hotel search form, we've put them in a box in field sets, 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.

We'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 redesigned hotel booking search interface on the bokahotell.se website. The top navigation bar includes links for Home, Book hotels, Conference booking, About us, and Contact us. The main search area is titled "Quick hotel search" and features a "Select nights" calendar grid. The grid shows dates from 27 to 30 of the previous month, followed by the current month (February) with days 1 through 16 highlighted in green, and days 17 through 30 highlighted in orange. A cursor is visible over the date 10. To the right of the calendar are sections for "Location" (with Stockholm selected), "Details" (Number of rooms: 1, Guests per room: 1), and a "Show deals" button. Below these are sections for "Hotel bookings" (with a message about 20 years' experience and a photo of a woman on a phone), "Featured breaks" (listing various hotel packages with prices), and "Conferences" (with a photo of a conference room). A Valentine's Day promotion for February 14 is also visible.

Case study: 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.

We've kept close to the original branding and content, but notice how many non-content pixels have been removed, leaving more white space, and the effect on readability at every level.

The original website features a prominent 'LOVE YOUR WORK!' banner in red and yellow. Below it, there's a grid of 'Featured Franchises' with logos for Oporto, Kleenmaid, MATCHB, Red Rooster, Clark Rubber, Signwave, and others. To the right, there's a sidebar with a 'WIN an iPod' section, a 'buy no auctions' section, and a 'sell no waiting' section. The overall layout is cluttered with many small, overlapping elements.

The redesigned website has a much cleaner and organized layout. The 'LOVE YOUR WORK!' banner is gone, replaced by a large, clear 'Buying a franchise' button. The 'Featured Franchises' section is simplified, showing logos for Synergy Business, Clark Rubber, Kleenmaid, Signwave, Safetyquip Australia, Jumping J-Jays, 1800-GOT-JUNK?, 7 Eleven Stores, Matchbox Franchising, Expense Reduction Analysts, The Coffee Club Franchising, Holy Sheet, Red Rooster, Hungry Jacks, and Domino's Pizza. The sidebar on the right is also simplified, featuring a 'red rooster' logo, a 'it's gotta be red' slogan, and a 'complete the Franchisee Survey' button. The overall design is more professional and user-friendly.

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

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?”
- 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 final 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 type of content.

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 meaning far more accurately than could be possible with imagery.

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 simpler and more direct than images, which means they can be more accurate, especially with abstract concepts.

How do you sum up the concept of “everyone” pictorially? Sure, a bunch of thumbnail portraits of people's faces would hint in that direction, but it could still include other meanings.

You can communicate “everyone” with just one word, and no ambiguity, and using a fraction of the pixels.

Search engines love text

Search engines need meaning in the form of text. Optimising a web site for search engines usually involves simply getting the right concentration of words and phrases into the right pages. While images can tell search engines something about the content, it's limited to the *alt* or *longdesc* properties, whereas words can be given more semantic value (meaning) by using strong, emphasis, or a heading.

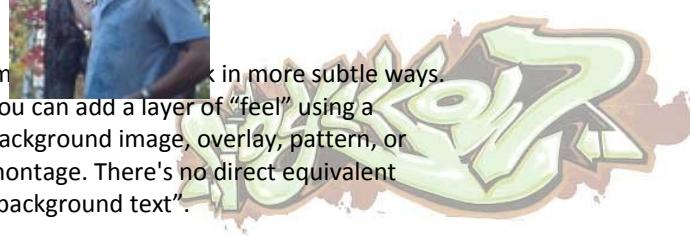
Power of images

Images are richer, and can quickly communicate more meaning on more different levels.

If you want to communicate a feeling, or a complex set of brand attributes, the right photo might say everything you want to say in a way that the visitor gets instantly.

Images can speak in more subtle ways.

You can add a layer of "feel" using a background image, overlay, pattern, or montage. There's no direct equivalent "background text".



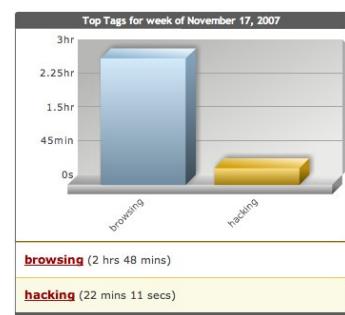
[Photo from Robyn Gallagher](#)



Imagery can pack a punch in so many ways. (Take a great one-panel cartoon, like Gary Larson's *Far Side*). A well-crafted picture can contain loads of subtlety, humour and impact that maybe can't even be achieved in words.

Another area in which imagery can shine is the high-level summary of complex information. Graphs can tell you a lot of info using less space and fewer pixels than the equivalent text chart.

[Caricature by Dan](#)



[Graph by nimbu](#)

Both together

Get the best of both worlds by juxtaposing getable imagery (for instant recognition, emotive content, or richness) with getable text (for direct accurate meaning).

The Complete Health Community
A place to share all health issues
Come in and browse the site...

Small Business Solutions
Manage all your web communications with one app
Starting at \$24/month
Suitable for up to 5 users

Support your customers when they need it

Tips for better text

The main thing is: **less, less, less!**

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 things you use to communicate it the better.

Don't state the obvious. 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?

Front-loading

Front-loading means putting the most **meaningful** words and phrases (keywords/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. It's also good practice to use lots of paragraphs.. When putting articles online, I'll rarely put more than 1 or 2 sentences in a paragraph.
- Headings should always be concise, clear, brief, yet use 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).

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 money shot, a headline that gives away as much of "what this page as few words as possible. Then follow it up with a summary which tells the whole story in just a couple of sentences (more than the main heading).



with the
is about" in
paragraph,
explicit

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

Turn to a
know

Check it out next time you have a newspaper in your hand. new page, read just the headline, and think "How much do I 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.

Imagine a spiral with the core of the story in its centre. The main heading is the first loop going outwards from the centre, followed by the intro block, then more detail. Each loop is generally “about” the page topic that’s encompassed in the main heading, but takes in additional information from elsewhere.

Tips for better imagery

Illustrate goals

For imagery, a great thing to show is the **goal-state**. For example, with Bokahotell's conference booking, it would be really powerful to show people smiling and shaking hands at a conference (showing 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 message is, “If this (goal-state) appeals to you, that’s what we’re offering.”

Focus 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 pixels that carry the content. You could also use techniques like blurring, reducing contrast, or desaturating the less meaningful areas without affecting the composition.

Case Study: Active Allowance

- Check out the inverted pyramid, giving you a quick overview first, and letting you browse down for more info.
- The image of the smiling children is indirectly illustrating the **benefits** (visitor's goal). Note that there are no background pixels, and the meaningful content fills the frame.
- The graphic below the kids carries quite a lot of meaning with relatively few pixels. Both images are backed up with short text labels that combine to hit those mental checkboxes.

redesign

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Active Allowance website. At the top, there's a black header bar with the 'Active Allowance' logo, a 'About us' button (which is being clicked), a 'Blog' button, and a 'Contact us' button. Below the header is a green navigation bar with four tabs: 'Home', 'How it Works', 'FAQs', and 'Register now!'. The main content area has a white background. At the top of the content, the text 'Teaching kids dollars and sense' is displayed. Below this, there's a section about the benefits of the program, featuring a photo of two smiling children. To the right of the photo, a green box contains the text 'Active Allowance builds self-esteem and skills...'. Further down, there's a section titled 'Billie' with a checklist for 'Feed dog', 'Homework', and 'Don't fight', each accompanied by a checkbox. A green box labeled 'Easy-to-use checklists' is positioned next to this. At the bottom left, there's a 'More info...' link with three sub-links: 'How it works >', 'More about the Benefits >', and 'FAQs >'. The bottom right features a testimonial from 'Jeremy Freedman' with a link 'more testimonials...'. The footer contains links for 'Home', 'About us', 'Contact us', 'Terms & conditions', and 'Privacy policy'.

Case study: Trace Tracker

Trace Tracker are a unique company based in Scandinavia. They've developed a data system for capturing and tracking almost anything at every transition 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! How much do you learn from the original home page?

The problem is that you can need a lot of information to explain a novel concept.

original

The screenshot shows the Trace Tracker homepage. At the top, there is a banner with the text "Consumer trust is the to be or not to be of the food industry". Below the banner, there is a navigation bar with links: Home, News, Products & Services, Customer cases, Partners, About us, Careers, Investor Relations, and a language switcher. To the right of the navigation bar is a small image of a person's face. On the left side, there is a sidebar with a section titled "What We Do" containing text and a "Read more >>" link. Below this is a section titled "Food for Thought" with a quote from Per Johan Rønneberg and a "Read more >>" link. In the center, there are several news items with titles like "GTNet and TraceCore XML" and "IBM and TraceTracker combine HACCP and traceability", each with a "Read more >>" link. To the right of the central content is a sidebar titled "Events" listing various conferences and a "Brochures" section with links to various documents. At the bottom right is a "Whitepapers" section with links to "Food Safety and Traceability joint forces" and "Technical Architecture Whitepaper".

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 the TraceTracker website with a clean, modern design. The header features a logo with a blue circle and the text "tracetracker". Below the logo is a navigation bar with links: News, Products & Services (highlighted in black), Case studies, Partners, About us, Careers, and Investor Relations. Underneath the navigation bar are three categories: 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 system as a central hub connecting five stages of the food value chain: Production, Processing, Warehousing, Retail, and Consumer. Red dots on the arrows indicate data entry points. Callout boxes provide details:

- Member suppliers and producers log details of products and raw materials and where they are sent.
- Products and materials can be entered onto GTNet at every step of the lifecycle, building a complete picture.
- TraceTracker even tracks the crucial final link to consumers through credit and payment card transactions.

End – hope you enjoyed it!