Establishing the Online Presence of Ames' Most Iconic Restaurant: An Evaluation Report of Hickory Park

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Introduction

Since its opening in 1970, Hickory Park has been a local tradition for Ames residents. However, as the culture has migrated online, Hickory Park has occasionally struggled to match the pace of the evolving world. In 2009, they joined Facebook to extend their social network to a new generation. However, their website has fallen out of date and requires significant updating to match the demands of the growing customer base. While some of the themes are consistent with the restaurant brand, the design - including fonts, colors, photos, and other elements - should undergo a redesign to a more modern style. There are also significant issues with user experience and usability, including missing links, a poorly formatted mobile site, and unclear processes for waitlist usage and online ordering. Especially given the circumstances imposed by COVID-19, current information and user-friendly design have become more crucial than ever before.

By updating the formatting, the color scheme, the outdated and difficult-to-read fonts, and the unsuitable images, the site will have improved flow and user experience even before the site structure is addressed. The site should also be streamlined for convenient mobile use as increased numbers of customers utilize their easily accessible devices for everyday functions. Additional instructions for using pages not directly through the Hickory Park domain, including the "Order Online" and the "Wait List" pages, will also provide less technologically-savvy users with the tools they need to navigate the site. A page discussing the current COVID-19 procedures should also be included immediately upon opening the website. For customers who do not use Facebook or Instagram for policy updates, there is no information on the website regarding drive-through pickup, seating restrictions, or sanitization procedures. By making these changes, the website will not only improve the visual appeal, but will enhance user experience and broaden accessibility for all customers.

Summary

Hickory Park has been a local Ames tradition since its founding in 1970. However, during the last few years, the restaurant has not regularly updated their website or other online platforms. Therefore, each of Hickory Park's online platforms should be updated to improve the visual appeal, enhance user experience, and broaden accessibility for all customers, ensuring that Hickory Park will remain a local tradition for generations to come.

In analyzing the public presence of Hickory Park, the company website, Facebook page, Instagram page, and Yelp page were examined and contrasted to the same pages of another local barbeque restaurant, Jethro's BBQ. On top of the flaws immediately visible when examining the Hickory Park website, comparing to the sites of a similar restaurant revealed both additional weaknesses and a standard for potential areas of improvement.

Discussion

Modernizing a Local Tradition: Design

Nearly every Ames resident has visited the region's iconic barbeque restaurant, Hickory Park, whose founding in 1970 has created a local tradition. However, as the world has transitioned online, generally in the last decade and specifically in this last season, Hickory Park has struggled to stay abreast of the changing online design trends. As the color scheme, fonts, and layout are some of the first things that stand out to site visitors, providing a visually appealing style can capture visitors with a positive brand impression and foster new customer relationships.

Figure 1. Homepage to Hickory Park's Website.

Immediately upon opening the home page, visitors are greeted by a wall of brown boxes with tiny and hard to read fonts and an obscure photograph that looks in the windows of the restaurant, shown by Figure 1.

The home page of the website features four shades of brown that give the site a completely dark and monotone appearance. When paired with a brighter color like white, brown can provide an element of comfort and security, but an overabundance conveys emotions such as loneliness or uncleanliness, certainly not goals for the communications of a family restaurant (verywellmind.com).

The lack of contrast makes it difficult to focus on any specific area of the page, and the color conveys a complete and utter lack of excitement.
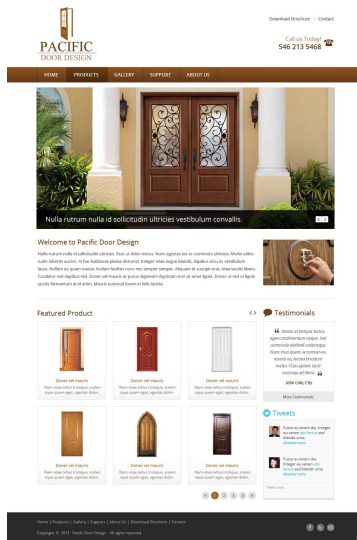

Figure 2. Website featuring a brown accent color.

As the brown color is an integral part of the company brand, it should not be eliminated entirely, but should instead be included as an accent color against a lighter base rather than forming the core of the visuals. Figure 2 shown to the left provides an example of a brighter, more welcoming site that still features brown as the primary accent color. Figure 3, which displays a portion of the home page for Jethro's BBQ, another central Iowa family barbeque restaurant, demonstrates that brown can also be utilized as a theme color when paired with unique, complementing textures and brighter colors. The inclusion of brown as part of the background lends the site a rustic and grounded mood while the brighter and lighter colors provide places for the eye to focus and draw attention to specific areas of the page. Hickory Park should modify their website design to include either lighter or brighter colors in addition to the brown to exude a more favorable feeling and highlight areas of interest on each page.

The website should also be reconfigured to utilize the available space. While designs do not need to occupy the entire screen, the Hickory Park site completely disregards the power of flow and white space, instead condensing all of the content for each page into a small grouping of brown boxes set against an unattractive yellow and brown background design. Not only does this small format shrink the site and contribute to the inaccessibility of the fonts, it also breaks up the page and makes it incredibly hard to navigate as there is no clear sense of direction.
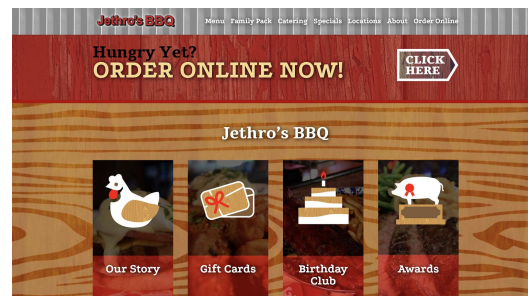

Figure 3. Jethro's BBQ home page.

Instead of being condensed into small boxes at the center of the screen and contrasted against an unattractive yellowed background, the content should be dispersed on a solid background that expands to the edges of the screen. This will improve the flow and navigation of the site, draw in visitors through opportunities to highlight specific content, and make all content easier to read and comprehend. As Figure 4 shows, the headings and the menu bar are misaligned and extend off the edges of the page. On an updated site, all headings and sections should be completely aligned to create clearly defined sections and boundaries for the page.
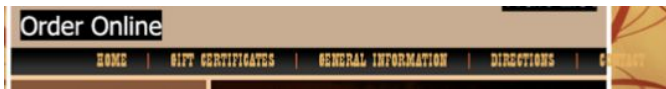
Figure 4. Out of place headings.

Each of those boxes contains segments of text relating to menus, catering, employment, and other important topics, but the content is obscured by the small, low-contrast font and the difficult-to-read headings. Yellow or tan text against brown backgrounds provides low contrast, so there is little difference between the main content and the rest of the page, and visitors' eyes are not immediately drawn to any particular place. While the heavy, western font is an easily recognizable aspect of the restaurant brand, it should be limited to a select few headings for its narrow and blocky shape. Some of the headings are also misaligned from the top of the page, making them significantly more difficult to read.

Fonts are an incredibly important part of brand recognition, so the classic blocky western font should be maintained in some areas of the site. However, it should not be used over abundantly as it lends to the cramped style of the pages. "Typefaces are the foundation of accessible visual reading experiences, so choosing a performant typeface that enhances legibility and readability . . . is of paramount importance if you want your written information to be as accessible as possible" (Williams). Right now, the headings contain a blend of uppercase and lowercase letters. However, where the western font is used, all letters should be capitalized to maintain consistency with the logo. The sans serif font used for the smaller headings and body text can remain as well, but all of the body text should be sized up and should contrast strongly against the background to provide font accessibility for users with reading disabilities or customers with poor eyesight. Setting specific and consistent scales and patterns for the usage of each font in different stylistic elements will provide flow and clearly marked sections on each page of the website.

Finally, the monochromatic and obscure photos from each page should be removed and replaced with updated photos of relevant settings. For example, the photo on the home page, the first image that most visitors see on the site, is not a daytime photo of the building facade and restaurant sign. Instead, the page features a nighttime photo taken of the restaurant interior through an outside window. To any new customer, the interior is unrecognizable, and the portion

Figure 5. Image on homepage.

shown provides no point-of-reference for visitors. In a similar vein, the "Gift Certificates" page has a photo of the front candy display and the "Directions" page has an incorrectly cropped image of several small children drinking a shake in front of the
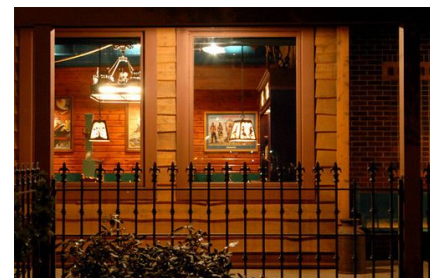
same candy display. None of these images fit well with the pages on which they are located.

To fit the context of each page, the photos should be replaced with images relevant to the content. To draw new customers in and provide them with a point of reference for the business, the photo included on the home page should be a wide photo of the restaurant facade and sign as shown in Figure 5. The image of the children on the "Directions" page could be repurposed and migrated to the "Gift Certificates" page with the heading "Provide others with the opportunity to create memories that will last for years to come." Encouraging customers that they are not giving just food with a gift certificate, but lifetime family memories, may help to increase gift sales, especially as we enter the holiday season. Instead of having a restaurant photo and a link on the side to the Google Maps site, the "Directions" page should feature a map of Hickory Park and the surrounding area to clearly indicate to customers the location of the restaurant in relation to the city.

By updating each element of the design - color, formatting, text style, and photographs - the site mood could more accurately reflect the restaurant experience, draw more customers in through the site, and provide details and updates for generations of loyal customers.

Improving Accessibility For All: User Experience

Design is an important aspect of user experience, but if the website is flooded with technical issues, a beautiful design cannot cover a lacking usability. The Hickory Park website has its fair share of design flaws, but not nearly as many as its technical flaws. There are links that lead to nowhere, the site is difficult to navigate on a mobile device, and the ordering processes lack clear instructions.

Adapting a website for mobile users has become increasingly important with the rise of smartphone use. Upon entering the mobile website, almost all the formatting is off. As seen in Figure 6, the bottom text extends past the edges of its box, the picture only takes up a third of its original space, and the centering of the headings is off. Besides this, the mobile site looks identical to its original website. The small font size forces the mobile user to zoom in in order to read the text or click on any of the links.

Figure 6. Mobile screen view of home page.

Not only is the website difficult to navigate, but it is not entirely functional. Both the "General Information" heading and "Job description" links lead to a "page not found" error, and
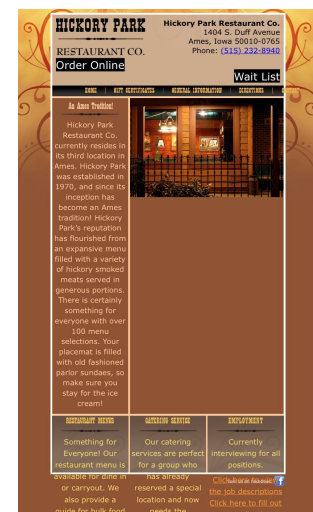
the directions link, which supposedly opens directions in Google Maps, does not work on mobile devices. The "Wait List" link at the top of the page takes you to a Yelp review site, with unclear instructions on how to use the wait list. Each of the links also opens within the same tab, which can make it difficult for users to backtrack and draws them away from the main website.

Due to Hickory Park's family-friendly appeal, many users will be families on the go. Thus, updating the mobile site is a top priority. In comparison, Jethro's BBQ, another popular BBQ restaurant in Ames, has a mobile site that is far more up-to-date and user-friendly. It features a "Go to…" drop-down menu at the top of the page so users can easily navigate to different parts of the website. Users scroll down to find large text headings with pictures directing them throughout the site, making it easy to find restaurant locations, menus, gifts & rewards, online ordering, and more.

One major point of improvement for Hickory Park's user experience would be to correct any links that do not lead the customer to where they would expect. Some of the links on the site are formatted incorrectly and lead straight to an error page. Fixing and testing these links regularly is a good way to improve the overall experience of the site. Another solution to improve the overall mobile experience is to make sure when the customer tries to scroll to a different section of the site they can successfully reach where they need to go. This is a simple fix that would take minimal effort on the company's part but make a massive difference for the customer. Lastly, in the "Wait List" section of the site, instructions are unclear and confusing. The link immediately leads to a Yelp review and waitlist site with no instructions or tips on how to place an order. Adding a page with instructions could help create a smoother process for ordering and making reservations.

While the lacking design detracts from the user experience, the severe usability flaws of dead links, difficult navigation, lack of instructions, and unusable mobile site cripple the usability and overshadow any positive aspects of user experience.

Providing a New Platform for Future Generations: Social Media

A big part of improving accessibility for user experience is using a variety of social media platforms to accommodate and advertise to different generations. Although Hickory Park has one up-to-date social media page, Facebook, they have struggled to provide a platform that accommodates college students, who comprise a large portion of the restaurant's customer base.

Hickory Park's main social media platform is their Facebook page. This page is actively updated with promotions, images displaying delicious foods, and details on how they are handling the COVID-19 pandemic with things like curbside pickup. However, as a

large portion of customers are college students, Facebook is not the most effective platform for promotion. Shown in Figure 7, research on the most used social media networks for college students shows that only 3% of teenaged to college-aged kids use

	Spring 2018	Fall 2018	Spring 2019	Fall 2019
Snapchat	45%	46%	41%	44%
Instagram	26%	32%	35%	35%
TikTok	-	-	0%	4%
Twitter	9%	6%	6%	3%
Facebook	8%	6%	6%	3%
Pinterest	1%	1%	1%	3%
Tumblr	-	-	-	-
Google+	-	-	-	-
Other	-	-	-	-

Figure 7. Study on social media platforms.

Facebook as their primary social media platform (Clement). Actively using their Facebook account to interact with their customer base has been a great way for Hickory Park to promote the restaurant and all that it has to offer. Nonetheless, the restaurant needs to research and seek out platforms to accommodate for other portions of their customer base.

The same research's data from Figure 7 indicates that 35% of the people in the study believe Instagram is the most important social media platform they have (Clement). Hickory Park appears to have an account on Instagram shown in Figure 8, but it has not been updated in months. Inactive social media accounts create confusion, frustration, and lack of activity from their followers. Businesses with inactive social media accounts tend to lose their following base and credibility on that platform. As Hickory Park's Instagram has been inactive for months, they have lost a major platform for their customers to visit and stay updated with restaurant news.

Figure 8. Hickory Park's Instagram page.

Hickory Park comprises a considerable portion of dining in the Ames area, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become apparent that they do not participate in any delivery sites that might give people access to their restaurant without dining in. During the pandemic, fewer people are going out to restaurants because of the risk of eating out. However, more people are using delivery services to continue the enjoyment of eating their favorite foods from their favorite restaurants. Restaurants utilizing such home delivery options have expanded their customer base. However, Hickory Park's lack of home delivery isolates longtime customers who would prefer not to dine in-person.

Hickory Park's lack of social media platforms can easily be addressed. Social media has become incredibly accessible, so creating profiles for the restaurant on additional platforms would require minimal effort. Hickory Park is already a well-known and
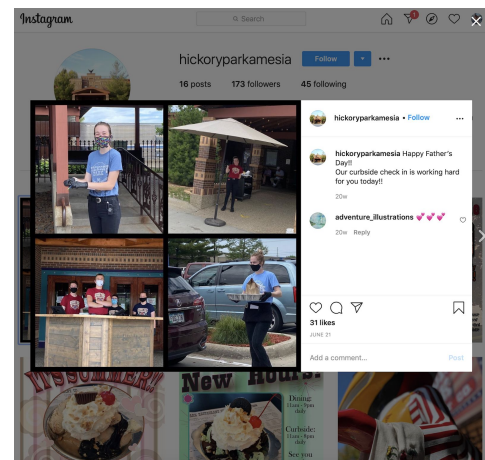
respected restaurant whose customers desire to continue returning. Since the restaurant has successfully maintained an updated Facebook page, that same content could be recycled for other platforms to connect with all demographics of customers.

For fixing their lack of delivery options, there are companies such as Uber eats or DoorDash that work with restaurants to deliver food to customers. Should they choose to join such a service, Hickory Park would not have to invest in setting up their own delivery system, yet could still satisfy their customers with options of eating at home.

Through joining services to continue connecting with customers and updating multiple social media platforms to reach a multitude of demographics, Hickory Park would continue to establish itself as an essential player in the Ames restaurant field.

Conclusion

Hickory Park, an Ames culinary tradition founded in 1970, has struggled to keep its website and some of its social media platforms up-to-date in this new era of online connection. The more recent migration to the web, initiated by the coronavirus lockdown, has revealed shortcomings in the online presence of the local barbeque restaurant. Although some of the themes are consistent with the restaurant brand, the design - including fonts, colors, photos, and other elements - has become severely outdated and should receive significant updates. In addition to design flaws, there are also a multitude of flaws in user experience and usability, including missing links, a poorly-formatted mobile site, and an unclear process for waitlist usage and online ordering. In this web-centered culture, Hickory Park should consider updating all digital outlets of communication or risk losing a long-faithful customer base to lack of clarity in business communication.

By updating the formatting, color scheme, fonts, and images, the site will improve flow and user experience even before addressing the issues in site structure. Each page should also be streamlined for convenient mobile use as increased numbers of customers utilize the ever-present cellphone. Including additional instructions for processes such as ordering online and joining the dine-in waiting list will also provide less technologically-savvy users with the tools they need to continue patronizing the business. Information regarding drive-through pickup, seating restrictions, or sanitization procedures should also be included through all digital outlets, including the website and each social media page, to ensure that every user is fully aware of the current procedures and how they can have the best customer experience. By making these changes, the website can improve the visual appeal, enhance user experience, and broaden accessibility for all customers, ensuring that Hickory Park will remain a local tradition for generations to come.

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