7 STEPS TO

NATURAL WEBDESIGN

Or how creating extreme good web sites!

Version 1: November 2001
Updated October 25, 2005

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Some lines about myself

I am actually working as an Internet executive specialised in the rescuing and tuning of major e-Business platforms.

My first Internet experiences date from 1991 but I really discovered the web creation and publishing in June 1995. Since that day, my life changed as I have been opening and tuning everything from small web sites to major websites with one millions daily visitors and e-business platforms managing 2000 simultaneous transactions per second.

Natural web design is something contradictory as the web is always something artificial. How can something artificial become natural? Just by working hard to align your website to what your internet visitors want and to satisfy their user experience.

This document gives you my experiences in how I made several websites give a natural look.

Have a nice reading and let me know at theonlineceo@yahoo.com what your think of it and if it worked for you.

INTRODUCTION

It is important to design your website for your audience. Fancy images, properly balanced layouts, good references and marketing campaigns are important but never start with it as you have to act on a global scale – and not just images.

You are building a web site for your customers – and they have huge expectations so you have to deliver what they want.

Remember, the most important thing is to have fun with it and you should transfer this enthusiasm to your audience. Forget it if your main reason is to make money with your website or if you can to become famous.

Step 1: Who is your audience?

You have to understand 2 basic items:

- Who do you want to write to?
  - Are you focusing to young people between 10-15 years, to people above 55 years, to housewives or to executives?
  - Where do they live? Do you want to join all of them or only those who lives in major towns or just those that live in small rural areas?
  - Are they more female, more male than the average internet audience? If there is a difference, use it as a competitive advantage.

- How many are they? You can find some indications in demographic studies.

- Are you sending your messages to a local audience or a national audience? You have to find your audience and don't think to big.

Remark: just to give you an example of someone who found his audience – I once got stuck through the snow in a small mountain village in the French Alps. The hotel boss indicated me that they had a very active Internet community. I then met the webmaster… who was also the priest of the village. He created a web site for everyone in the village – a part for the young ones, a part for the mountain farmers and a part for the elderly people. They all used the internet to communicate with their family, they published pictures, wrote their history and experiences… it was a very lively community. And not to forget the tourist office also animated that web site. The web site had an average of 600 weekly visits so it was perfectly up and running.

Step 2: What values do they have?

- Analyse all references that are important for this generation.
  - What music do they listen? What are their favourite TV programs?
  - What kind of clothing is important for them?
  - What kind of magazines do they read? If you don't know, just buy some journals and list the items you find in them.
  - What social activities are important? Is it family, group or individual oriented?
  - Do they have heroes?
- What is their history?
  Do they have something in common you can build on?
    - For young people, it could be a music idol as they are fan of someone. For elderly people, they can also be fan of someone but they have perhaps another story in common like the glorious sixties, the disco of the seventies…
    - Did they discover the Internet at the same time? Is there a special reason for this discovery?
  Do they have something in comment they dislike all?
    - Perhaps they all like to avoid things. I once met a group that disliked TV but after analysis, they just disliked it for the TV commercials. So once this discovered, I gave them focused information on documentaries that were shown on TV channels with a low level of commercials.

Step 3: What do they search?

- Detect what is important for this generation.
    - Do they want to have fun on your site, exchange information or look for information?
    - What issue do they want to handle?
    - Do they want to read, to chat, to publish…?
- What visual identity do they like?
    - Can you link a colour to their needs? If they are looking for gardening, a green colour is easy to pick but each subject has its appropriate colour.
    - Are there kinds of visuals they like more than others?
- Do they look for information or just links to information?
    - It could be handful to guide them to a lot of material like book reviews, web sites to find information… but take care not to go too far in this activity as any link to an external source can make your client leave your web site.
- Do they have something they look for?
    - For instance, I once had to create a web site for an imitator of Elvis Presley so I asked his fans what they like in him what they did not find in Elvis Presley. The answer they gave was sociability… so I used this element as one of the web design enablers

Step 4: How do they behave?

Know how they behave, talk and spend their money.

- For the youngsters
    - They have always some problems with money.
    - They want to show they are older then they are so their idols are 5 years older than they are.
    - They like to enjoy life in group so they can show everyone they are "cool".

- For the 55+ people
    - They have earned money and as their children have left their home, they can easily spend some money.
    - They want to show they are young so they will pay the latest high-tech items and the latest trends in fashion.
    - They like to enjoy life and go to good restaurants.

Some things to remember:

Everything is dynamic so do not fix yourself on these numbers.

Step 5: Create your user experience

You have to find the key enablers that create that unique user experience for your audience.

- Integrate the key elements of your audience
  - Their vision, their clothing, their touching, their tasting, their mobility, their wishing to be young...
  - The way they travel, practice sport, work in their garden…

- Reply to some key elements of your audience
  - For elderly people: the Internet is something weird so try to explain things to them in easy language so they know to talk to their children of what it means to have blogs, RSS, MMS, Podcasting….
  - Change the items on your page so they reflect the season. In summertime, talk about summer events, the sun, vacations…. In wintertime, talk about winter events, snow and still vacation.

Step 6: The right mediamix

You have to find the right mediamix between online – offline items. It could be a good idea to include a lot of different medias to your web site like:
- TV shows
  - I know a person that writes every week a short summary on what she learned on discovery channel. Just 5 lines but extremely powerful.
- Radio
  - Try the same thing as above. I know a lot of people that also save the radio show and use it as a podcast issues. Don't do this as it rarely adds value to your web site. Also think about copyright issues.
- Written press
  - If you find a good book, create a summary of your own what you liked and why others should also go to the bookshop and buy it.
  - If you find a nice article, you can ask the author to publish it on your web site or create a link to his article.
- Other Internet web sites
  - This is a difficult issue. It can help you to give more information to your clients but it can also be an exit channel. If you link to a partner web site, take care of the value that it adds. It could be the case that the user finds it more attractive than yours and keeps getting back … but not to your site.

Step 7: Using Web Analytic tools

It is Important to use Web Analytic Tools to understand how your web site works. Good web analytic tools can give you the following information:
- How people arrive on your web site!
  - Do they use search engines – if so, what keyword did they type to arrive on your web site.
  - If you sponsored campaigns, find out which campaigns worked out best.
- The after-home-page experience.
  - How many people get further than your homepage?
  - Where did they go? Is it there where you wanted them to go?
  - If your initial goal was to have N% to part X on your site and M% to part Y, is this really happening that way?

- If you can track the use of an internal search engine, please check how many people use it more than 3 times inside a visit. This could indicate a serious problem and the fact people do not find what they are looking on your web site. If you can get the keywords they selected, you know what to add to your site.
  - You can also end each search page with a small comment box asking a visitor if they found what they were looking for – if not, fill in a small form and you will get back to them as soon as possible. (even if you don't have it, get back to the customer as this gives a professional impression and he will get back to your site. If you don't get in contact, he or she will be lost forever).
- Where do people leave your web site?
  - A lot do leave through the home-page but some exit-pages can indicate a problem or a shortness of information on your web site.
  - If more than 3% of the people are leaving through a link that you put on your web site, investigate if this is a good thing.
  - Publicity can kill your audience as people can click on an advertisement and leave your site. Instead of making money with online sales, you directed them to another site.
- When do they connect to what part of the site?
  - Is it in the morning, at noon or in the evening?
  - If it is during a workday, it could indicate people connecting from work (not exclusively but it gives an indication).

Authors' comments: You need web analytics to understand user experience – why they got to your web site and what they were looking for.
I once modified a web site that had 75% of visitors leaving after one page. By modifying the homepage to what people were looking for into something I called a natural answer to their needs, I got to only 20% visitors leaving after a one page visit. With this number, the web site answered better to what people wanted. We tuned it one month later and got to a 12% one-page-visit.

Learn from your success and grow

Successful web site designers know it is critical to learn from results to move on fast and get even better results.

Having a nice web site is not enough – your web site has to be a natural thing so it has to live with the seasons. You have to nurture it like you have to give water to your flowers.
Unfortunately, flowers flourish but they also fane away. One you see numbers going down, you can still try to nurture it but it could be time to look for new flowers or a complete new web design.

Authors' comments: I use a lot of Rapid Visual Change methodologies to update my web site. This can be some images but also to change the layout of my home page.

Example: I once designed a B2B communication channel and to keep it attractive, I updated it twice a week – with a particularity that there was a big change each Monday morning. Due to some extremely heavy rain storms, I lost a lot of time in my professional travels and got delayed in my work so I decided not to update the interface that particular Monday – thinking a website could stay the same for 2 weeks time. At my surprise, we received 25 calls on that Monday morning of customers complaining our web site had a problem as it was not updated!
At my surprise, it indicated that my website was important for a lot of people and that change was a natural item them.

Let me know what you think about this article and send me an email at theonlineceo@yahoo.com !

If you want some advice on a particular web design issue, please send me an email and I'll give you some free advice as soon as possible.