
Form vs. Function

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I've been thinking a lot about web design lately and the philosophy surrounding it. Along with my personal observations regarding the structure, layout, coding and presentation used by a wide variety of websites, recent XBIZ message board threads concerning the best width to make a website, as well as a thread I started on standards-compliant design practices, among others, have caused me to reconsider the whole philosophical purpose of the web page and how its design can impact the realization of this purpose.

As an easy example, consider the goals of a search engine optimization specialist when designing a web page. Rather than focusing on how best to convey a message to a human reader, this designer strives to present a nonhuman entity (the search engine's spider program) with carefully prepared information in the manner the spider thrives on.

The desired goal is a page that ranks more favorably among the search engines than another, similar page that, despite having an equal amount of information, was not as carefully designed.

" consider your design elements to be the canvas upon which your content is displayed "

This article isn't meant to dwell on SEO techniques, but that example easily points to the practical application of a design philosophy: Give the customer what he wants in the way he wants it — regardless of who or what the customer is.

Consider this. When a surfer goes online, he isn't thinking, "I want to find a really pretty website," he's thinking: "I want to find some specific product or service to fill some specific need," even if that product is porn and his specific need is "to take a load off."

Does this mean that creative design is totally unimportant in adult website presentation?

No, especially not in the visually vital adult entertainment marketplace; and while some experienced webmasters feel that design is unimportant, I feel that it is more important to consider why you are building a website, rather than simply crafting a presentation that you feel "looks right" — or is the same as everybody else is doing.

The Reason 'Why'

For our purposes, the reason "why" we are building an adult entertainment website is to deliver adult multimedia content (photos, videos, stories, chat, games, etc.) for profit to consumers on demand.

These folks are not terribly interested in our logos, color schemes, font styles or graphics beyond their ability (when done and used correctly) to enhance the presentation of the content we are offering. They're visiting because they want those photos, videos, stories, etc. — and they want them now — which led to another design philosophy: "The faster, the better." If you make them wait, they'll most likely leave and go somewhere else.

In this context, we can move on to my most recent consideration regarding site design: whether or not a page's presentation serves as a "frame" or a "canvas" for the content it's intended to deliver.

Frame vs. Canvas

It seems that most webmasters (and nearly every designer) use design as a frame surrounding the web page's content; like a decorative frame on a painting, its characteristics (size, shape, color, materials) will influence the way in which the page is seen and the content perceived. This nicety is unfortunately where most folks seem to spend most of their design time.

Rather than a frame — or in addition to, but always as the underlying foundation of your web page's design — consider your design elements to be the canvas upon which your content is displayed.

When you consider the painting metaphor, the digital canvas parallel is fitting. A patron hoping to view a noted artwork will be far less interested in the material the canvas is made from, or its size and color, as he will be in enjoying the image painted over it. As an afterthought, as well as part of his initial impression of the piece, he also will take note of its frame, but the reason he came was to see the picture.

This brings us to the concept of using your base-level design to provide a control panel by which users may access online content via your digital canvas. To put it another way, while a frame should provide an image with enhancement, it's the canvas that plays the more important, supporting role, which is to deliver the content to the customer.

By focusing on the most efficient methods of distributing the content your site's visitors are seeking, you'll streamline the movement of these visitors through your website while increasing their overall satisfaction with your site's user experience.

Usability Concerns

Carrying this concept of using the web page as a control panel for accessing online multimedia content further, we see the importance of addressing basic usability issues such as offering redundant, intuitive navigation systems that are easy to use.

Think about how you use your television remote control. You don't usually have to drill down through more than three levels, if any at all, to find what you're looking for. Make your site's navigation — its control panel — just as easy.

As I mentioned earlier, I've been looking at issues with designing standards-compliant websites as defined by www.w3c.org, the organization that helps run the Internet. The ultimate accessibility issue is whether or not the potential customer can see the web page at all, let alone in the way you had intended. Standards-compliant design helps ensure this, and the organization's online code-validation tools make compliance checking free and easy.

A Working Philosophy

So this then is what I'm looking at in the world of web design — or more specifically, the world of profitably marketing online adult content intended for delivery via the web to customers on demand:

A design approach that utilizes standards-compliant design as the canvas upon which the content is laid, with an intuitive interface for content selection, viewing and sundry administrative needs, which also loads quickly and focuses on ease of use, augmented by elements that provide an attractive visual enhancement to the content while respecting the customer's bandwidth limitations.

Whether this talk of having a "design philosophy" sounds simple, sensible or silly will all depend upon your own perspective, but the important lesson is to go beyond thinking about "what" your designs should look like and spend some time considering "why" you're making them in the first place — and how best that goal can be accomplished.

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