

## **Viewpoint: Looks do count, but an honest presentation matters more**

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The Internet is a whole new ball game, and many in the advertising world don't have a clue how to play. While image is everything in the traditional realm of slick ads and catchy commercials, content is king on the Web. This is true even for multimedia Web sites. Even for marketing-oriented multimedia Web sites.

A recent study from the Poynter Institute and Stanford University found that, unlike newspapers and magazines, people who read news on Web sites typically focus on the text first, looking at photos and other graphics afterward. The text, graphics, audio and video you provide--the content--are more important than stylishly designed pages enhanced by gewgaws.

"Content is the `there' that's there," says Christopher Barr, president of the Internet Content Coalition and editor at large for computer information site CNET. "It's what people go to the Web for."

### **SUBSTANCE BEATS STYLE**

On the Web, substance triumphs over style, and the lowly word reigns supreme. People's opinion of you and your clients is determined to a great extent by your command of those words, says Charles Rubin, author of 30 books about technology including "Guerrilla Marketing Online."

How a Web site looks is still important, helping to establish professionalism and credibility. And multimedia will become more important as cable, DSL and other broadband Web connections become more widespread. But text demands respect.

Like any medium, writing for the Web is unique. For one thing, the Web demands both conciseness and comprehensiveness.

Most people read only the first screen of text on any given Web page. "Ninety percent of people reading a Web page don't scroll down," says Jack Powers, director of the International Informatics Institute, a New York think tank on interactive media. Unlike when they buy a newspaper or magazine, people typically make no investment to view a Web site, so they have less incentive to keep reading, says Jakob Nielsen, principal of the Nielsen Norman Group, an information technology consultancy in Atherton, Calif.

Yet, when Web surfers like what they see, they want as much as they can get. The Web makes in-depth elaboration possible by having fewer space limitations than any other medium. But dumping screenful upon screenful of text on a page is reader abuse.

### **GIVE READERS OPTIONS**

Dividing a site or section into pages and linking them is fundamental, letting readers pause before deciding to move on. Make it clear up front how many links are involved so readers know what they're getting into. But don't straitjacket them into following only one path. Positioning navigation buttons for all major sections of the site at the edge of pages and providing a search engine, site map or index all help readers control their surfing experience. And make sure that links--especially to other sites--are current.

Conversely, don't frustrate readers by subdividing pages too much. One trick is to include summaries. Interested readers can then link from the summary to the longer text passage. A second trick is to provide a printer-friendly version, stripped of images and other design elements.

Mutual fund company Vanguard Group, does a good job of presenting objective information about investing in easily digestible chunks.

## **SAVVY, SKEPTICAL AUDIENCE**

Web users are generally savvy and skeptical, and avoid exaggerated, self-congratulatory puffery and marketese. Put your best foot forward, but the more you blow up your company or client, the more readers will blow you off.

Identify who's behind the content your site provides. If it seems you have tried to cloak the sponsor, particularly if the information is favorable toward the sponsor's products, you'll lose the audience completely. Pharmaceutical marketer Pfizer, at [www.pfizer.com](http://www.pfizer.com), always identifies it's the sponsor of patient-education material it provides.

It's also best to make company background information available from the home page. Since recent is better than older information, include a "last updated" or similar line. Skip linking to an incomplete or under-construction section to prevent reader frustration.

One of the worst mistakes is repurposing stuffy bureaucratic-sounding text from printed sources. The Web is a personal communications medium. The relative anonymity of the Internet makes it easy to get to know the intimate details of others' lives at warp speed. Consequently, people expect real personalities and distinct voices on the Web. Infuse as much of your organizational or individual personality into your text as possible. Be conversational, though not chatty or gossipy, by using words such as "you," "we," "us" and "our."

Finally, keep in mind that interactivity is what most distinguishes the Internet from other media.

Build in ways for readers to talk to you and among themselves. Examples include feedback through e-mail or Web response forms, discussion boards and chat rooms. When you do get feedback, be sure, in some way at least, to acknowledge it. Not responding, which happens all too often, will reflect negatively on your entire effort.