

How to make a

HORRIBLE WEBSITE.

brought to you by the guys at [zosima:development](#)

It's official: everyone is now on the web.

Everyone uses e-mail. Everyone uses IM. Everyone is now an expert.

And increasingly, people are deciding to put their knowledge to good use. Everyone is now becoming a web designer. They've spent enough time online to know what looks good and what doesn't, and they want to make a few extra bucks by making websites for the people they know.

These people come from various locations and backgrounds, but there's one thing most of them have in common: they make sites that are kinda ugly, and don't work very well.

We at Zosima couldn't be happier. We *love* ugly websites. But we don't think the world of horrible web design has reached its full potential yet. So we'd like to help.

This guide was created to help its readers create astonishingly horrible sites. Whether you've hired a design firm or are building your own, the tips should provide you with ample firepower to create the kind of mind-numbing experience your users are hoping for.

Whatever you do, do not break these rules. If you do, your users will be pleasantly surprised, perhaps even delighted, and in many cases compelled to actually *contact you*. Which none of us want – after all, we're busy watching *American Idol*. Enjoy.

HAVE AS VAGUE A CONCEPT AS POSSIBLE FOR YOUR WEB STRATEGY.

In the infamous dot-com days, anyone could walk into a venture capitalist, say they “wanted to do stuff on the Internet,” and walk out with millions of unmarked bills in a steel briefcase. It didn’t matter what the concept was, or whether their idea had any potential for making money. The Internet was a golden ticket to riches.

Since the bubble burst, experts have claimed that a big reason for the downfall was the lack of a definite strategy. They claim that you need to have a product or service that people actually want, as well as some plan for making your online presence a valuable tool in your marketing arsenal.

Experts, shmexperts.

The first step in any horrible website plan is to not have a plan. You should go into the project with as little understanding of your direction as possible. After all, no one follows through on plans anyway.

Your web strategy should be short and succinct – it’s been our experience that phrases like “support the company mission” or “build awareness” or “make money” are all perfectly acceptable. Once you’ve written your sentence down, be sure to take a break. After all, you’ve just finished some very serious thought work, and you don’t want to pull a muscle.

MIMIC THE BIG BOYS.

Microsoft didn't get where they are by thinking small. Neither did McKinsey or Southwest Airlines. Neither should you.

Just because you're a one-person consulting company working out of your parent's house doesn't mean that you can't have an awesome website. And the best way to have an awesome website is to stop thinking small.

When you sit down with your web designer or embark on a new project yourself, take some time to check out sites like Amazon and Yahoo! Lots of people will tell you that it's foolish to try to become the eBay of landscaping companies. Don't listen to them.

Even with a small budget, it's perfectly reasonable to expect your design firm to go along with your aspirations. If they express even the slightest hesitation at the idea of building a dynamic, database-driven, hundred-page website that can provide a customized user experience for \$3,000, fire them immediately and find someone who sees your vision.

Even if you can't find a firm that believes in the dream, just remember that their hesitation is not because your expectations are too high – it's because they're afraid of success.

Whatever you do, don't lose heart. You can always do it yourself.

REPEAT AFTER ME: THE INTERNET IS JUST LIKE TELEVISION.

A visit to most advertising agency websites will feature lots of high-bandwidth movies, sound effects and Flash animations. Companies pay boatloads of money for sites like these, and for good reason.

Some people think that people browse the Internet looking for information. These same people will tell you that the Internet is most effective when thought of as a direct marketing tool – one that can be customized and measured regularly to find what works the best.

These people obviously haven't seen how cool a site can look when it's all fancied-up.

People go online to be entertained. They go there to see a little online movie in their 14-inch monitor. Even better, they couldn't care less how long it takes to load; they will happily sit in front of their computer as your mammoth site takes 15 minutes to download.

Think about the sites you keep coming back to, and the people you regard as experts online. Are they the ones with lots of content that's regularly updated? Are they the ones that send you a newsletter once a month giving you valuable advice? Are they the ones that answer your questions?

Or do you check out the site with the same three minute Flash intro every day? Yeah, us too.

USABILITY? WHO CARES?

There has been a ton written about the so-called “benefits” of usability. The idea is that when your site is easy to use, people are more inclined to use it.

Such thinking can place a severe clamp on your personal creativity, and doesn't consider the fact that your site is going to be *really* cool.

You can see it now – some middle-level executive is looking for a print shop to do a run of business cards – the exact service you provide! They stumble onto your site and are immediately overcome with its beauty. They don't really care where the navigation is, or whether they can tell immediately what it is that your company does. With a site as attractive as yours, they don't mind putting their to-do list aside and digging around a bit.

They're no longer even thinking of alternatives. They must use your services; must get in contact with you. If only they could find a way to actually get a hold of you...that's right, we want to make them *really* want it.

Make your site as difficult to use as possible. It'll be like a fun little game for your user. And who doesn't love games?

INCLUDE A BUNCH OF COOL TRICKS AND EXTRAS FOR THEIR OWN SAKE.

People like neat tricks. So it makes sense that few things excite users more than animated email buttons and blinking text. The great thing about the Internet is that you can find tons of little snippets of code that can make fancy drop-down menus, create sentences that scroll across the screen, or even have neat transitions from page to page, just like a PowerPoint slide show!

The best thing about these little gizmos is that they can be used on anyone's website! There's absolutely no reason to not use them. Our suggestion – make a goal to incorporate a minimum of 12 tricks on every page. People will think you're extremely web-savvy, and will definitely be contacting you as soon as they get the chance.

Want to make an even better impression? Use different tricks on each page! With a little bit of work, you can make your site just like the carnival!

One more tip – include one of those “search the web” tools on your site. People would much rather come to your site than Google or Yahoo! to do their searching.

FORGET ABOUT STANDARDS.

A small number of companies have changed their sites to adhere to web standards. These guidelines are created by a bunch of dorky people over at the World Wide Web Consortium. Supposedly, standards are supposed to make sites faster-loading, easier to update and maintain, cheaper to develop, and more effective in search engine positioning.

Yeah, and I'm sure the Earth is round, too.

Building a site with standards will make it look ugly in old browsers. Who cares if the site works on anything from a PDA to a mobile phone – at Zosima we use Internet Explorer 4.0, and standards-based sites look funky. Sure, we could do what most people have already done and just download an updated browser. But then *they* would win.

Standards-based companies try to entice you with elegant sites that are a breeze to update, just so they can charge you more up front. Who cares if they understand the future of the web? Sounds like arrogance to us.

Keep using old HTML and tables. Support the cause. Besides, anything worth doing should be difficult.

USE FLASH – A LOT.

It bears repeating. Nothing on the Internet has been cooler than the introduction of Flash. Flash can make a site move around a bunch, with neat animations for text and images.

Flash has proven to be an effective tool for creating interactive games and entertaining cartoons, but such content has been hit or miss at best – most of these concepts have either been implemented poorly or have unsuccessfully tried to be humorous.

This, coupled with the fact that Flash is inherently a usability nightmare, hurts search engine rankings, and often requires people to download the plug-in (something they often choose to avoid doing) leads many experts to advise against it.

But we all know the winner in business is the one who's willing to be unconventional. So we suggest you incorporate Flash into every single element of your site. Don't just use it for advertisements – use it in your navigation. Create an animated logo and tagline. Place all of your text into Flash – preferably in the form of images.

Flash is just like Jell-O. There's *always* room for more.

MAKE IT UNCLEAR WHERE YOU WANT THE USER TO GO.

Seth Godin wrote a book where he suggested that the average web user is like a monkey looking for a banana – if you don't make the banana really obvious and easy to find, the monkey will go somewhere else.

In other words, he thinks that you should give your user a compelling reason to continue through your site. And once you've identified that compelling reason, you should make that "banana" the most important part of the page.

We couldn't disagree more.

People like having options. It's therefore extremely important that you cram as much information as possible into your site, particularly on the homepage.

Marketers have written at length about the importance of focus. By trying to be everything to everybody, you risk creating an image that is bland and appealing to no one.

But the web is much different. People come to your site because they have lots of time on their hands and want to learn everything about your company. So go ahead and put everything you can think of on there. Forget about the banana – people will take the time to figure out where you want them to go. Trust us.

WHITE SPACE = BAD.

Pick up any book on aesthetics and you'll be sure to read about the importance of white space. It supposedly will guide the eye through the page and keep the user from getting confused. They'll also tell you it's more pleasing to look at.

Designers tell you this because they are lazy. They want to leave as much off a page as possible because it allows them to hit happy hour early.

The fact is that when a user looks at a site that employs the use of white space, they don't think it's attractive at all. They think that the company can't think of enough to say about themselves. In fact, when a user encounters a site that fills up the entire page with text, they are impressed.

So go ahead – get rid of the white space. What the hell, strip out the images while you're at it. Make it your goal to have a web page that looks just like a Microsoft Word document.

TALK ABOUT YOURSELF.

People come to your site for a very specific reason, and it's not to find answers to their questions or discover a solution to their problems.

They're bored. They're lonely. They want a friend. And they want to learn as much about their new friend as possible.

Your site should include as much "me-focused" language as possible. Tell the readers all about your company's story; why you do what you do, your history, your awards, and your philosophy on the world. Think of your site as one big personal ad, and the reader is a potential suitor.

Avoid talking about the reader's problems at all costs. Some people think that web users will find it refreshing to discover a site that specifically addresses their problems. Some people think that you should go through your site and replace words like "me" and "we" and "us" with words like "you" and "your."

These people are idiots.

We find ourselves drawn to people who constantly talk about themselves, so it makes sense to write your content the same way.

USE FRONTPAGE.

In high school or college or tech school, tons of students get introduced to the wonderful world of HTML using programs like Dreamweaver or Microsoft Frontpage. These products allow the novice to just drag and drop items into their web pages with ease.

Sites created in this fashion look much different than sites that are coded by hand. The programs often add “unnecessary” elements into the markup, don’t allow the coder as much control over the look of their site, and have often been critiqued by serious designers as “cheesy-looking.”

We think these designers are just arrogant, and are gluttons for punishment. They hard code not because it makes the site faster, sleeker and more attractive. They do it because they want to make things hard on themselves.

Our opinion? Use Frontpage. Who cares if there’s a bunch of extraneous markup? Who cares if the site doesn’t look as good? Who cares if the professional development community will laugh at you? You’re not making sites for designers – you’re making them for potential customers.

And, as we’ve already established, customers don’t care about clean, attractive, fast-loading sites. They care about *you*. Very much.

DON'T MEASURE ANYTHING.

Amazon is notorious for measurement. On any given day they will measure a few dozen variables. They believe that measurement is the key to success.

Smaller companies have followed Amazon's lead. By taking advantage of the instant feedback and reporting offered by the Internet, a small number of companies have chosen to use their web budget on a smaller site that they test constantly. By measuring headlines, content, colors, and special offers, they try to find the combination that generates the best results.

That's all well and good, but who wants to work that hard?

Measuring a site based on results would require that we swallow our egos and admit that we might not know everything. It would require that we don't fall in love with a particular idea before we determine whether or not it will truly be successful.

And frankly, we're way too full of ourselves to do anything like that.

CONCLUDING REMARKS.

If you follow the simple steps outlined in the previous pages, we're confident that your site will be one of the ugliest and most ineffective around. At the very least, its profit potential will be dramatically decreased.

Breaking the rules won't necessarily guarantee success, but they will sure make your site more appealing to many more people. Folks will start coming to your site, signing up for your newsletters, buying your products, and sending you e-mail asking for more information.

What a nightmare.

It is our sincere hope that you've found this booklet useful. Feel free to send it to your friends and colleagues. Let's see how far we can push the boundaries of ugliness and uselessness on the Internet. Together, we can look forward to a much more aggravating future.

Best of luck,

The guys at Zosima

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