

Taking web design more seriously

The sad truth is that most organizations view their web sites and the people who design and build them as part of the “cost” in *cost center*. “No,” they say, “the people at the tip of the spear who are generating revenue for the business are the salespeople.” But how many people can even the best salesperson speak with in a given month? 50? 100? 200? While some reps may see an impressive number of people and influence how they view the company, a web designer’s work may be viewed by millions of people every month, all of whom will make judgments about the organization based on their experience with the site. And research* has proven that visitors’ ultimate likelihood to transact with an organization is heavily influenced by their experience with an organization’s web site. The point is not to disparage salespeople, but to help prioritize the increasingly influential role that web design has in shaping how an organization is perceived.

So why isn’t web design taken more seriously?

Web Design is Broken: It’s Probably Your Fault

We believe the way organizations *think* about web design is why so many web sites end up in the sorry state they do. If web design was valued as a way to expand profitability and achieve organizational objectives, we wouldn’t see statistics like this:

*The average online shopping cart abandonment rate is 59.8%.***

That means only 4 in 10 people who put something into their shopping carts end up completing their transactions. This figure is dismaying, because we know that simple design changes usually result in a sizable drop in abandonment and *easy money* in the merchant’s pocket. But most organizations don’t even know what their abandonment rate is, or equally bad, accept a high abandonment rate as something they can’t do much about.

* Lindgaard G., Fernandes G. J., Dudek C. & Brown, J., “Attention web designers: You have 50 milliseconds to make a good first impression!” *Behaviour and Information Technology*, 25:115 - 126 (2006).

** *Marketing Sherpa E-commerce Benchmark Guide*.

Cost center:

Executive code for any obligatory support department that doesn’t actually make money.

Easy money:

Low-effort, low-risk, high-return investments. Normally rare. Prized for its ability to generate big profits.

Given the low investment (basic design changes to make the cart and checkout process more intuitive) and high payoff (from 3% to 20% more revenue every month thereafter) you'd think online merchants would have made these changes already. But an *average* abandonment rate of 59.8% makes it clear that most organizations haven't even tried. Why?

Organizations end up getting in their own way and prioritizing poorly based on the most obviously visible elements (e.g., the home page) instead of those areas where changes may yield a higher ROI. We've worked on a lot of web design projects over the years, from projects for the smallest mom-and-pops to some of the largest Fortune 500 companies. Our experience convinces us that the way most web sites are managed, designed, and built is seriously flawed.

"We need to have a picture of ducks on the home page because the CEO loves ducks."

Blame management

Anyone who's been involved with web design for any length of time will recognize these common web design decision drivers:

- **Executive ego.** "We need to have a picture of ducks on the home page because the CEO loves ducks."
- **Competitor envy.** "Did you see the change Competicon, Inc. made to their site? We need to do the same exact thing. Now!"
- **Strategy by buzzword.** "We need to Ajax-ify our site and leverage Social Media to enable User-Generated Content. Everyone's going Web 2.0 and we can't afford to be left behind."
- **Tradition.** "That usability enhancement isn't consistent with our design standards."

All of which offers an unsettling and possibly controversial conclusion: Many people making the big decisions about web design today are unqualified to do so. How many CEOs and VPs of Marketing have a background in experience design, usability, or online marketing? How many of them could look at *and* understand their web analytics reports? How many of them actually observe as users interact with their site during user testing? Very few. Yet most don't think twice about making design decisions that have a huge impact on user experience.

To be clear, we're not advocating the removal of executives from the web design decision loop. We're advocating that executives collaborate with site managers and designers to make *better informed* decisions based on hard data, research, and web design best practices. Decisions that reflect an appreciation for the impact on the user experience and, accordingly, the site/business performance metrics. In other words, we think web design decisions deserve the same level of seriousness and discipline as other strategic business decisions.

We're making the case for treating web design as a critical role that has the same potential to impact an organization's success as Sales, Marketing, Legal, and Finance.

Blame IT

Because web design requires some technical skills, many organizations initially chose to place responsibility for their web site in the IT department, making the web marketing people dependent on IT to make site changes. The problem with this setup is that the IT group likely has multiple projects that take priority over the web site. So marketing-related requests end up at the bottom of the queue, and the web site rarely gets updated.

One of our clients has been trying for years to shift to a new content management platform only to be shot down by IT replying that her project was in *sustained engineering*, which has become one of our favorite euphemisms for "no," as in:

"We're working on a major ERP installation right now, so we don't have the resources to tackle those web site changes. Ask the guys over in Sustained Engineering."

Blame designers

We don't let designers off the hook too easily, either. Many designers subordinate the user experience to their creative goals, ignoring the work's broader implications and instead treating the web site as an outlet for their creativity.

Others take a more technical approach, focusing on site technology instead of user experience and business impact. But does it help the organization to have a site with perfect XHTML and a poor user experience?

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Sustained engineering:

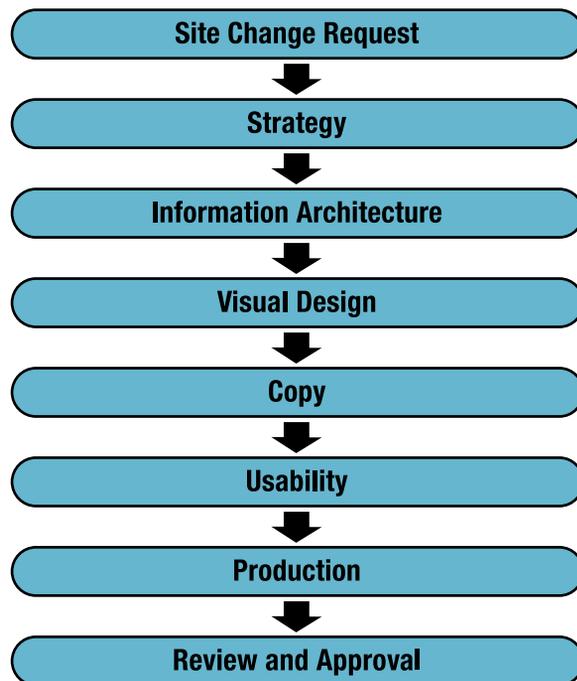
A euphemism used by technical people that means "We're never going to work on this project."

Web designers are in a unique position to play the role of user advocate, but to do so credibly requires designers to understand business language and inform themselves about goals, strategy, and metrics.

Blame the process

In fairness, the fault isn't all with executives, IT, or designers. Sometimes it's the web design *process* that's broken. Faced with an environment where they have limited control, people often control things they can change while ignoring things they can't.

Many organizations, particularly large ones, have a web development process that looks like this, with different specialists performing some work on the site before handing the project off to the next group.



Like a giant game of “Telephone,” the end result is often unrecognizable to the person initiating the request.

This arrangement offers the person making the request very little visibility during the process and therefore minimal influence over the end result. Each group makes dozens of subjective design and technology decisions based on their assumptions, interpretations, or personal preferences. Then, all those small decisions are incorporated into the final product in some way, but rarely communicated to the next group when the handoff occurs. So like a giant game of “Telephone,” the end result is often unrecognizable to the person initiating the request.

To refine the process, many organizations develop additional guidelines, standards, and specifications. Such efforts are usually doomed: it's almost impossible to anticipate and account for each little decision comprising a web design project. And as we'll see later, it's those little decisions that make a big difference in the site's performance.

In recognition of the problems inherent in the traditional web development model, some progressive organizations are adopting the newer "agile development" model, which turns the old model on its head. The principles of agile development include: small teams, rapid iterations, constant refinement, and less documentation, among others.* We believe this model is the wave of the future, but very few organizations have yet to adopt it.

Blame the agency

"That's a great idea, but we have an agency that does all our actual design work, so let's wait and see what they come up with."

Many organizations have outsourced the strategy, design and/or maintenance of web sites to an outside agency. We question the wisdom of outsourcing a function as fundamental as web strategy, as doing so can foster an unhealthy dependence on the agency. Yet this can work well where the agency truly understands the organization's strategies and target audiences, can successfully develop a site that melds the needs of both groups, and is held accountable for achieving specific business metrics. But it can also be a recipe for disaster if the agency is poorly managed, left in the dark about company strategy, or success metrics are never defined or enforced.

Sadly, there are also cases where the agency has a different agenda than the client. At the low end, we've seen "chop shop" agencies that prey on their less Internet-savvy clients and produce the same cookie-cutter sites for every client while charging for a custom design. At the high end, we've seen agencies who are more interested in winning awards and showcasing their creativity than in achieving their clients' objectives (if your agency uses the phrase "rich immersive experience" or similar terms to describe their goals for the site, you can relate to this scenario).

**For an enjoyable and illuminating summary of the agile development approach to building web applications, we recommend reading "Getting Real" by 37signals.*