

D. On Literacy Database

5. CREATING A HOMEPAGE: CONCEPTS AND TOOLS

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1. Introduction

This paper describes in brief the concepts and processes involved in homepage development. It gives the general steps in the content development and message selection phase and in the planning of the visual design, technical planning, formatting and actual implementation prior to publishing the homepage in the Web. Also discussed are considerations and issues that need to be taken into account at the various stages of homepage development.

2. Why Homepage?

One of the emerging information delivery systems via the Internet is the homepage. Some of the reasons for its growing popularity are:

- (1) It is an information service desk that never closes. Once online, the information recipients have access to the information twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week throughout the year. Information is accessed without any information officers or trainers or other project staff. It offers interactive sessions which often times, are virtual reality, with the help of sight, sound and motion. It is a cost effective delivery mode - the cheapest way to reach 35 million prospective clients/beneficiaries.
- (2) It is a venue for sharing information and knowledge. The overlying philosophy of the Internet is the spirit of sharing, especially when information is of particular interest to specific users. The basic assumption is that no information is too insignificant to merit a space in the Net.
- (3) It readily accessible to the present clients and possible clients. The homepage is totally at the user's disposal, whenever and whenever he needs it. It has the ability to combine institutional information, new trends, research and service desks into one package.
- (4) It reduces the distances and geographical isolation. No matter how remote the location of the user is, the homepage provides the same information to urban areas that are wear communication facilities

- (5) It provides general orientation as well as learning enrichment facility.

Current homepages on the Web include the following sectors¹:

- Banking
- Event information
- Education/instruction
- Package delivery
- Shopping, comparison pricing
- Personnel placements/ads
- Software and hardware support
- Stock listings and transactions
- Industrial product listing
- Internet advertising rate comparisons and listing
- Gaming and contests
- Software demonstration
- Catalog shopping and ordering
- News search
- Research services

3. General Steps in Homepage Development

- (1) Content Planning and Message Design
 - a) Define objectives/audience
 - b) Organise content points to be presented in the homepage
 - c) Prepare the structure, format and presentation sequence
- (2) Teaching Planning
 - a) Review the hardware and software to be used (built-in software, browsers, existing files in the computer such as pictures, illustrations, templates)
- (3) Implementation
 - a) In ready templates, the work is more simple because one only needs to fill in the blanks.
 - b) Replace existing text on template with the content that needs to be places in the homepage.
 - c) Put, add, subtract or modify elements (colours, illustrations, pictures, borders, etc.)
- (4) Creation of Links and Actual Linking of the Pages
- (5) Test and tryout

4. Considerations

- (1) In content planning and message development
The basic rules in content planning and message development apply to homepage packages: "Don't create a site without a mission."² Objectives should be clearly defined, with a specific target audience in mind. The homepage development should know what the audience wants to know about the organisation/services/products of the subject of the homepage.

- (2) Some guidelines in writing the text of the homepage³
- Use simple words, easy-to-read phrases
 - Avoid long sentences
 - Speak directly to the reader
 - Reduce punctuation marks
 - Do not use “as shown in the above” connectives

Some questions on content presentation:

- Legibility*. Can readers read the text quickly and accurately?
- Prominence*. Do users notice important items? Can they see the levels of importance of the banner (title), headlines, headings and body text?
- Consistency*. Within a page and among pages, do similar pieces of information appear the same?

Other questions related to the communication qualities of the homepage:

- Is the content, though brief, adequate enough in informing and generating audience interest?
- Does the content keep the audience attention?

The creators of the *Yahoo!* Search engine advise homepage developers never ever to design for themselves but for their audience, “To be successful in design, you must research your user audience ... in the library, in a store... in a market research test. Take time to create several prototypes and let users play with them.. at home, in the office, or on the roads.”⁴

(3) Technology Considerations

Homepage developers should carefully consider the technology applications in their homepage planning and design. One can design the most visually attractive homepages, but if they do not accomplish their objec-

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tives, then the packages will have little meaning and relevance. Some questions that could help in choosing a technology are:⁵

- Is this technology appropriate for my content?
- Is this technology compatible with my clients capabilities?
- Is this technology available or operational at the receiving end of the Net?
- Is this a mature technology and not a pilot?

(4) The medium forms an integral part of the message. Homepage developers should keep in mind the unique features of the Web as a communication medium. While the content development and message design for the Web is basically the same as for the other media, production skills differ considerably. Knowledge and experience with print and multimedia are helpful and an understanding of the audience’s active involvement in the message consumption is important⁶. The viewer interacts continuously with the informal presented on the homepage. He has a high level of decisions and message consumption choices.

(5) Visual Design Consideration

Good Web homepage designs do not have to do be complicated with multicolored visuals. They can be very simple in graphics/layout and still achieve a high degree of interactivity. Many homepage developers are sometimes more concerned with the visuals, without considering whether they end up confusing the audience. Although some pages may be attractive, carefully planned simple visuals may be more meaningful to the user.

Visuals should enhance the value of information, rather than distract user attention. Homepage developers should avoid brightly colored backgrounds, and should prepare visuals that can be quickly downloaded and if users do some re-sizing, the page layout is not destroyed.

Some pitfalls to avoid are described in the following:⁷

“I abused poor Kai and splashed intense color all over my Web page backgrounds. While it looked pretty, the text was instantly lost to distracting shapes and blobs, which of course didn’t match the shapes and blobs on my other pages. There was a lack of cohesion in my pages, which is fine for artsy-chaotic types like me, but potentially horrible for designers building corporate sites. It’s very easy, especially for new Web surfers, to get lost online. If a site uses consistent backgrounds, link colors, and mastheads to remind users that they are still where they started, it will create a sense of safety and stability in a very unstable and random medium. Creating this level of safety for users greatly increases the likelihood of repeat visits.

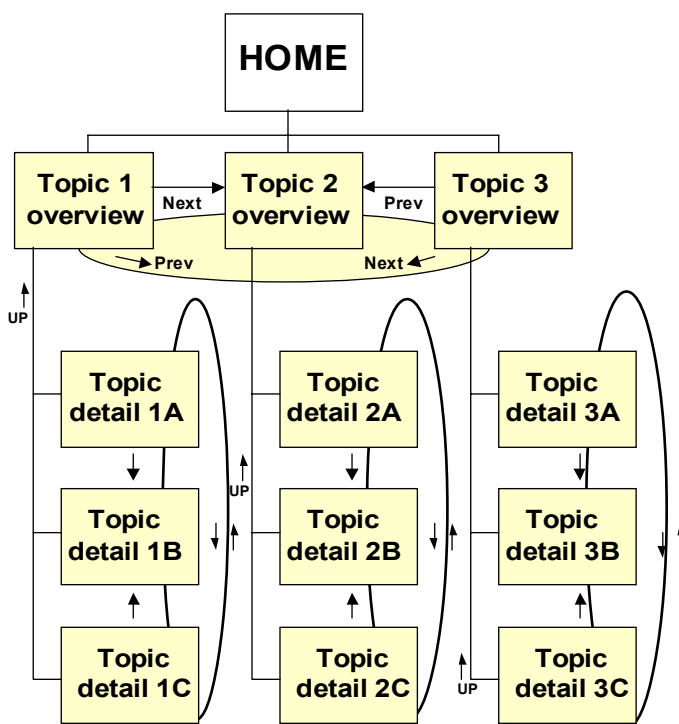
Having the graphics ready will save you an incredible amount of time when it comes to actually laying out the page. I spent far too long designing and redesigning logos, icon buttons, and page graphics because I was too lazy to sit down and organize the process from the start. It is difficult to flip-flop between programming and designing graphics. I would get to a point in my page and realize I never made the art for the story. I’d have to save and close my editor, open Photoshop, and ultimately create a mediocre graphic.

My other big mistake in my first page was lack of holistic concept. I wanted to tell people about me, splash my ego across the site, and at the same time have stories and ideas, places for people to post comments and questions, links, and lots of pictures.

But the question I find myself asking now is Why? Why build this site? In my case it was purely for the sake of having a home page, because I was given server space and told I could create anything I wanted.”

(6) Building the Homepage

A typical homepage looks as follows:⁸



- a) The homepage is the starting point from which Web users interact with the package. It serves as the summary page that gives the information at a glance. It is both an introduction and a gateway to the other information in the homepage, just like a magazine cover, the newspaper front page as well as an ad copy. It gives the first impression to the user and should therefore be interesting enough for him to go to the other parts of the package.
- b) Page layout is another point of focus in a homepage. The user sees the whole page before he looks at the details. He does not start in the upper-left corner of the page just like he does in a printed page. He looks at the page as a whole and proceeds to examine attention-getting elements of the

page. Therefore, the arrangement of elements is an important factor in internet-generation.

The page banner helps direct the attention of the user. Most homepages put the banner across the top of the page. It combines text and graphics to immediately orient the user to the purpose and content of the page.

In general, the banner should answer the user’s initial questions and it can accomplish the following:⁹

- *Identify the subject.* What is this page about? That is the reader’s first question.
- *Show its importance.* Within a cluster of related pages, there may be major and minor topics. Which is this one?
- *Indicate location.* Where am I? Users get lost. The page banner can tell them where they are on the Net and where they are within a cluster of related pages.
- *Impress the user.* Wow! Cool! That’s neat! A good page banner may so impress the user that the user actually decides to read something.
- *Express your corporate identity.* Who are you? What organisation published this page? Is it the same organisation that published another page I saw recently?
- *Set the tone.* How am I to interpret this page? Is it serious or is it a joke? The page banner should set a tone that tells the user whether the page is a video game or a safety warning.

Keep in mind, however, that no page banner can do everything equally well. As a designer it is your job to decide which purposes are more important.

5. Summary

Homepage developers must work with the following key points:

- (1) Start with the audience information needs, preferences, interests and information reception behavior/habit.
- (2) The homepage should address these needs and attune the format to the audience reception preferences and behavior.
- (3) The unique communication language of the Web should be taken into account in content development and message design.
- (4) Remember the audience’s technology limitations. Sophisticated graphics and images may take so long to download that the audience will just leave the site.

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read maps when they enter the world you create.

- (6) Remember that new technology may come along to change everything except remembering the audience.

NOTE:

1. Poppe Tyson, "Building Brand Applications for Global Audience," in John McCoy (ed.) *Mastering Web design*, California: Sybex, 1996, p.170
2. Joe Speaks, Dale Horstman and Joe Lackoff, "Running a Digital, California: Sybex, 1996, p.261
3. William Horton, Lee Taylor, Aarthus Ignacio and Nancy Hoft, *The Web Page Design Cookbook*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1996, p.320
4. David Shen, "Achieving Good Web Design," in John McCoy (ed.), *Mastering Web Design*, California: Sybex, 1996, p.320
5. John Holland Master and Tom Walter. "Blending Strategy and Aesthetics Online, " in John McCoy (ed.) *Mastering Web Design*, California: Sybex, 1996, p.231
6. Joe Speaks et. al., p.255
7. William Horton et. al. p.130
8. Ibid., p.506
9. Ibid., p.414