Artistic Web Design

Website Critique Checklist

Introduction

This checklist contains a set of questions that I use when I do critiques to determine the effectiveness of websites. You may find this checklist helpful while you review your own website to see how your site stacks up. In many cases, once you take a moment to consider your website vis-à-vis a given question it will be easy to see if it's doing a good job or not. But in other cases, it might not be so easy, particularly in some of the more technical areas. Also, be aware that it's easy to be blinded to your own website's faults because of your familiarity with it as well as your knowledge of your own industry. For an objective review, it's really best to have a professional look at your website. You can request a free review from me by simply clicking on the link at the bottom of any page and filling in the form on my web page. In the meantime, go ahead and give your site a look using the questions below as a guide.

Best wishes for the success of your website and your business,

David Salahi

949-362-0842

dave@artistic-webdesign.com

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Note: In the pages that follow, many of the questions are phrased as yes/no questions. In some cases, "yes" is the correct answer while in others, "no" is the correct answer. In most cases, the correct answer will be obvious but this may not always be true. If in doubt, send me an email at dave@artistic-webdesign.com.

Marketing Message

Your marketing message is the whole point of your website so if your site is not doing a good job of marketing your products and services, it's not doing its job. Therefore, this is the most important section in your website review. Here are some questions to help you determine how well your site is performing in this area:

- When a visitor arrives at your home page is it immediately obvious what kind of business you're in and what kind of products and services you offer?
- Are the benefits of your products and services clearly explained? Remember, features are not benefits. Features are what your product does. Benefits are what the user really wants from

your product. To define your product's benefits, ask yourself: how does my product or service improve my customer's life? In what ways does it make things faster / cheaper / better / safer / healthier / happier for him or her?

- Are all of your products' and services' benefits listed?
- Is there a call to action on every page? A call to action is not necessarily a plea to "BUY NOW!" It can also be an invitation to proceed to another web page or to email or call you. But every page should work to bring your website visitor one step closer to making a purchase.
- Does each page lead the visitor to another page, a page which is a logical follow-up to the current page? Guiding your visitors to take the next step helps keep them on your site and reduces the need to figure things out or make choices. You want to keep them engaged and keep them moving.
- Is the site oriented towards the customer's point of view (as opposed to your company's)? Your website should present things from the customer's P.O.V. The customer wants the answer to the question "what's in it for me?" If there's no obvious value to him, he will lose interest.
- Is the message focused on your business' market niche?
- Does the site emphasize your competitive advantages?
- Are there any time-limited offers to motivate buying?
- Is there a good tagline? Good taglines are clear, informative and short, about six to eight words. Good taglines quickly communicate to your customer what you do and what the benefit is.
- Does your site tell visitors how to buy? Can visitors quickly find pricing and ordering info?
- Does your site have contact info? Make it easy for your customers to reach you!
- If you have a retail location is your address and a map available? Be sure to mention any special info about directions or parking.

Content

The content on your site is the information your visitors come looking for. If content is missing, hard to find or poorly written, this will frustrate their efforts to learn about your products and services. This is the last thing you want. You need to have sufficient content to fully describe the benefits and features of your products. At the same time, you don't want the content to be excessively long or dense. People want quick information online. If your product or service is highly complex or technical and requires in-depth description, an optional PDF download is a good way to provide that.

And any additional content that you can provide to educate your visitors about your business/industry can be a bonus. By providing background info, buying guides and other useful info, visitors will come to

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regard your business as an authority in those areas and will have an incentive to return to your site and to refer others to it.

People love free stuff. Any free info or other giveaways you can offer is an incentive for people to visit your site and engage with your business.

Finally, content is what search engines index. Without sufficient content search engines don't have much to go on when indexing your site and, as a result, web searchers will have a hard time finding your site. Having plenty of good, solid info about your business and your industry is one of the best ways to move your site up in the search engine results (more on search engines below).
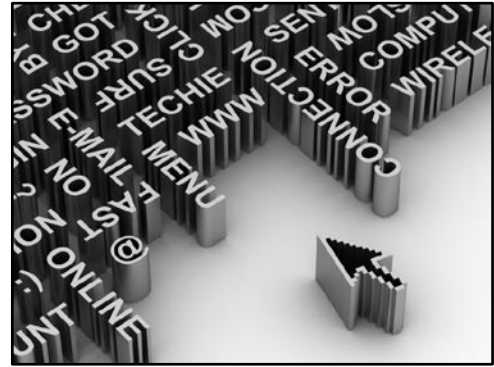
- How much solid information is available on the website?
- Are your company's products and services fully described?
- Is there any background information about your industry?
- Is there a buying guide or similar info to help educate your customers?
- Is the writing clear and concise? Is there filler text or other text that fails to inform (e.g., "Welcome to our site. We have lots of great products…")?
- Is the terminology easily understandable by the layman (or target audience)?
- Are there links to related useful sites (and not too many frivolous or unrelated links)? Does each link include a couple of sentences about the target site (to save the visitor the effort of clicking it just to find out what it's about)?
- Are there any free offers or other enticements to visit your site (or your store)?
- Is the content up to date? Is the posting date provided for information where that is relevant? Is the site updated regularly (this not only helps keep people coming back; it also improves your site rankings in search engines)?

Ease of Use

The usability of your site is critical in getting your message through to your website visitors. If the navigation is confusing, if the page layout is cluttered, if the text is too small or if any other factors prevent the visitor from quickly finding what he or she came looking for, your site's effectiveness is diminished. When visitors arrive at your home page, they should be able to tell at a glance if your site has what they want and, if so, where to find it. The questions in this section help you evaluate how well those goals are met.

- Does the home page answer these four questions:
 1. What is this site?

2. What do they have here?
3. What can I do here?
4. Why should I be here instead of at some other site?

- Is it easy for visitors to find the information they are seeking?
- Is the navigation menu (the list of links to the various pages on your site) easy to understand and operate?
- Is the navigation consistent throughout the site?
- Is it always clear which page the visitor is on? Does each page have a title? And is it clear how to get back to a previous page?
- Are the pages designed for scanning and easy readability? People don't like to spend a long time reading text on websites. Headings, larger text sizes, and bold text are tools you can use to help visitors find what they are looking for fast.
- Are all clickable items (links, buttons, images) easy to identify as being clickable?
- Is a search feature available?
- Is the text large enough to be easily readable?
- Can the visitor change the text size (i.e., does the text size change when the visitor does View → Text Size → larger/smaller in their browser menu)? What happens to the page layout if they do change it? Does the page still look good or, at least, not broken?
- Do the images support the text and vice-versa? Are there enough images (or too many)?
- Does the site load quickly?
- Do the colors on the page clash or distract from the content?
- Are choices clear and unambiguous? Is everything self-explanatory?
- Does the site avoid the need to scroll horizontally?

Design

Your website's design affects both your prospects' impression of your business and the usability of your site. Good design helps your customers quickly find the information they are looking for at the same time that it focuses their attention on your most important marketing messages. Flashy design is not a substitute for good content. But good design can help to support your content and make it easier to access.

Your website's design also projects an image for your business. In the same way that the neighborhood your office or store is in, the way it's decorated, and the way you yourself dress all project an image, your website's appearance makes a statement about your business. Obviously, different types of businesses need to project different images. A website for a sporting goods store needs a different look than one for a dentist, for example. The design of your site
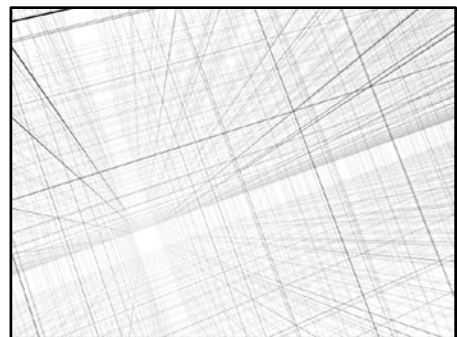
should be appropriate for the type of business you are in. And it should reflect your business' unique character and offerings.

Design includes the visual look and feel of your site and is composed of the following factors: page layout, colors, graphics, typography, and animation or other media. There are some basic design criteria that apply to all websites; following are some guidelines:

- Is the page layout clear? Or cluttered and confusing?
- Are related things grouped logically on the page? Is there sufficient white space to allow grouping/separation of related items?
- Does the page layout guide the visitor's eye to the most important parts of the page starting with the highest priority item and proceeding in order of priority?
- Is the design attractive (taking into account the fashions & styles of the target market)?
- Does the feeling imparted by the design support the company and its products & services?
- Is the page layout consistent throughout the site?
- Is the text easy to read (type large enough; good contrast with the background)?
- Does the site's appearance reinforce your business' visual branding (with respect to your logo, colors & printed materials)?
- Does the page design work well at various browser window sizes/screen resolutions?
- Does the imagery support the other visual elements?
- Are the colors appropriate for the type of company/industry?
- Is formatting applied consistently throughout the site?
- Does the site use outdated web styles (e.g., tiled backgrounds)? Or does it look modern and up to date?

Search Engine Friendliness

Search engine friendliness refers to the ability of search engines to find the information on your site. It also deals with questions of the keywords (search words) used on your website. Search engine optimization is a complex topic and specialized consultants exist who do nothing but this kind of work. However, there are some basics that apply to all websites and which should always be observed.

- Are HTML header tags containing important search words used?
- Does every page have an appropriate title that includes your important search words?
- Are search words used in link text?
- Are your major search words used frequently, in context, throughout the site?
- If your business is drawn from a particular geographical area are the names of the relevant cities, towns, etc. on your website?
- Is any content in Flash (harder to find by search engines)? If so, how much?

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- Is any important content in images (as opposed to text; content in images cannot be found by search engines unless you provide alt tags)?

For more details on search engine optimization request a copy of my free 7-page Search Engine Optimization whitepaper.

Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the ability of people using assistive technologies like screen readers to easily access the information on your site.

Note: Many of the questions in this section are duplicates of the ones in the Search Engine Friendliness section. This is because many of the things that make a site accessible to visitors using assistive technologies also help make it friendly to search engines.

- Is text in images or in Flash?
- Do images have meaningful alt tags?
- Is proper use made of title, heading, paragraph, list, etc. tags?
- Are image maps used (not accessible)?
- Are tables used for layout (tables make it hard to follow the logical page structure)?
- Is skip navigation functionality provided?

Annoyances

Here are some things that don't fall into other categories but which can turn people off your website.

- Is there a splash/intro page (slows the process of getting to your website)?
- Is there music or other sounds that cannot be turned off? And, if it can be turned off, is the visitor's choice remembered when they return to your site?
- Are pop-up windows used inappropriately?
- Are there broken images or links?
- Are there grammatical errors or misspellings?
- Is the marketing message too brash or too hard-sell?
- Do animated banner ads distract or annoy?

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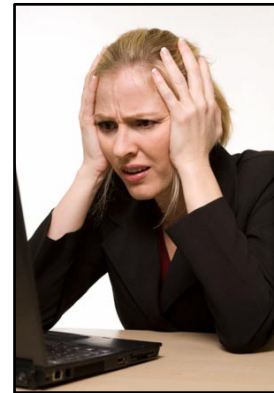
Technical Considerations

Does the site work well in all the major browsers? Web browsers are notorious for incompatibilities and differences in the way different browsers render a given page. If your site looks bad, or worse, fails to work at all, in a particular browser, you're likely to lose that website visitor as a customer.

Webby Awards Judging Criteria

The criteria used in judging for the annual Webby Awards include the following categories:

- Content: text, music, sound, animation, or video
- Structure and Navigation
- Visual Design
- Functionality
- Interactivity
- Overall Experience

For more info on how the Webby Awards judges evaluate websites, visit the Webby Awards Judging Criteria page. Also, have a look at some of the winners, particularly the ones in the category that most closely matches your business. Look for the things that make these sites work well and tell your web designer any specific sites that you like (and what, specifically, you like about them).

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