

Avoid These 5 Web Site Blunders!

by Alexandria K. Brown, "The E-zine Queen"

The Web is intended to help people find information quickly and easily. So why do so many sites make it difficult for users to get what they need? While neat design can add impact to your message, make sure the message itself doesn't get lost in the mix.

As president of a copywriting firm that writes and edits dozens of online projects a year, I've come across several common blunders that prevent effective communication via the Web. Here are my top five:

BLUNDER #1: Hiding who you are and what you do.

It's sad that many sites make it a challenge to figure out what they're about. Yes, it may be cool to have a giant dancing logo on your home page, but don't forget WHY your visitors are there: to learn what you can DO for them!

Be sure your home page includes a *short overview* that clearly and concisely describes what you have to offer. It's also a good idea to repeat your tagline or a short mission statement on *every page* of your site. Why? People can pop in and land on an inside page via a search engine/directory link that you may not be aware of. Make sure they know who you are right away.

BLUNDER #2: Writing for print.

Reading copy on a computer screen is different than reading printed text. We read online text more slowly, and we tend to scan rather than read because, visually, the words are harder to digest. Help your users find key words and concepts quickly by making your copy "scannable." Instead of intro paragraphs, use subheads. Use shorter sentences, paragraphs, and pages. Use bulleted lists. And use hyperlinks to give readers more info if they want it.

BLUNDER #3: Writing too formally.

Online readers expect a personal, upbeat tone. If you write like a bureaucrat, you risk turning off many users. Think ACTIVE voice rather than passive. (For example, instead of saying "the computer must be turned on" say "turn on the computer.") Write to your customers like you'd talk to them, and nix any industry jargon they may not understand.

Interestingly, I occasionally see the opposite problem. For example, a respected law firm's site shouldn't shout excitedly at customers as in a sweepstakes offer. Ask yourself: "How do my customers like to be talked to?" and that's your answer.

BLUNDER #4: Designing cryptic navigation.

Unfortunately, many sites don't seem to be truly designed with the end user in mind. Consider why users are visiting your site, then turn those reasons into your main navigation choices. Try to limit them to 8 or less. Then, create sub-navigation within those choices. But if there's an especially popular page on your site, why not put a special direct link from the home page? For example, on the home page of our site, we keep a direct link to our latest article or information about new awards we've won.

BLUNDER #5: Making it difficult to contact you or place an order.

I recently visited the Web site of an acclaimed furniture manufacturer, and I was ready to order one of their renowned ergonomic chairs. I clicked around, found the chair I wanted, and then quickly grew irate. Not only couldn't I find where to order it online, I couldn't even find their phone number to call and order one or find the nearest dealer! The results? One lost customer.

Put your phone number, an e-mail link, and a link to your order form (if you have one) on EVERY page of your Web site. Don't rely on your users having the patience to take a few extra steps. Make it as easy as possible, and they'll be much more likely to follow through (and return)!

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