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## The Art of Designing an Enticing Site

April 2006 - Patrick Evans

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Building an e-commerce Web site is about attracting audiences to your products and services while convincing them that it is absolutely necessary to purchase your wares. With so many options in Web design, it could be difficult to put together an attractive site that gets the job done.

Understanding the motivations and the possible intentions of anyone visiting the site is more important than anything else that could go on the Web page. "Contextual relevancy is the biggest enticement factor when it comes to commercial Web sites. If you do not connect with your target audience, no matter how nicely designed the site is, it will not entice people to interact with it," said Theodore Agranat, senior partner and CEO of Ceonex, a Web design and business solutions firm.

Adding content and features to a page is effective only if the audience would use these functions to enhance their experience on the site. "You have to play around with the balance of a Web site while identifying what your audience is looking for," said James Stanger, vice president of certification for Prosoft Learning Corp. "Basically, I think doing more with less is going to make an enticing Web page. The tendency lately has been to put as much on a page as possible, and it overwhelms the reader or the audience of the page."

What you choose to include, such as product blogs, user feedback, additional info, etc., should be used to suck the user into an online experience. "A site that is enticing makes you want to do more than look at it—it makes you want to use that site, dig in and look around, and end up buying something eventually, or at the very least, sign up for a newsletter, request more information, etc.," Agranat said.

Stanger added, "In most ways, creating an enticing Web page is finding some a way to build some sort of decent relationship with your visitors. This can be pretty hard to do when people stay a few seconds at a Web site." Building these relationships is pivotal to building either a user base or consuming audience that would use your site regularly over the competition.

Just as important as creating a friendly, interactive environment for your users to "get lost in" is the color scheme and branding that goes into the site itself. "It's important to integrate whatever established branding the company you're designing for into the commerce site. Keeping the color schemes familiar with what people would expect for that product is a must," Stanger said.

Eliciting specific emotions through the site's colors is just as important as sticking to the brand. Ceonex has developed what it calls Quantemo Studies to track and document the effects of different techniques on e-commerce experiences. "From what we have learned, some colors are energetic, vibrant, inspiring. Others are soothing and calming. The trick is to understand the emotions that will be most appropriate for your target audience to feel while visiting your site, and then provide those colors, along with appropriate visual imagery, that prompt those feelings," Agranat said.

Checking that any e-commerce Web site you design is usable for just about everybody ensures that your customer base isn't undermined. "I know lots of people love making 100 percent Flash-based pages, and I'm not so sure about this," Stanger said. "Flash works so differently from browser to browser, and many pages won't be the same for users across platforms. Companies really cannot afford to exclude users by designing a site that wouldn't work on certain machines."

The audience of the site and the company's business model is vital when building an attractive e-commerce site. "You have to think from the outside-in. If you don't put the consumer at the center of your focus during development, you will most likely not do well," Agranat said. "Consumers enjoy being in control of their shopping experience, and providing them with certain features like customer reviews, item descriptions and the like gives them that control.

"If your company's purpose is to sell stereo equipment, you have to make customers feel like they need to upgrade from what they currently have," he added. "You have to establish a perceived need for whatever you are selling. Keeping the site customer-centric is absolutely vital to this little seduction."

There are many successful e-commerce sites on the Web, but a few stand out as examples of how business sites should operate. Stanger lists superstore chains as impressive in their design. "It's interesting how the superstore sites like Wal-Mart and Home Depot are using tools like Flash to show off the latest and greatest products that they like to push and integrating it inside normal text-based pages well."

Agranat points to an obvious online retailer as quite efficient in its design. "Amazon.com is not 'the' standard of e-commerce sites for nothing. They have managed to make the shopping experience there truly interactive, with reviews and personalized recommendations that are quite often right on the money. Some things are still overwhelming—such as overview pages and some navigation—yet still handled quite well considering the stunning amounts of products they are offering for sale."

When designing an e-commerce Web site, you should avoid going crazy during the design and surprising the consumer or the audience with unorthodox design. "You have to use some sort of template," Stanger said. "Some people think that templates kill creativity, but the creative process should not go into the page itself. The creative process should go into the overall look and feel of the site. If you start with a good template, which is the result of defined audience, you will have a tremendous start to an e-commerce site."

"When you explore an option during development that may sound great, you have to ask yourself if this idea is very customer-centered," Agranat added. "The biggest mistake we see is a company trying too hard to be different and trying to mess with established best practices in design and function. Doing things like having your navigation appear on a picture of a cheeseburger on your home page isn't different, it's just silly, and it gets in the way of a pleasant and effortless experience for your users."

So, like any good relationship, the most attractive aspects of a Web site center around the consumer, not the company itself. The site designer should set out with certain consumer expectations in mind so as not to throw the customer off base and into the arms of another company.

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