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MARKETING RESOURCES

# Website Design



## *INTRODUCTION*

### **Chapter 1**

Taking The User On A Journey

### **Chapter 2**

Designing Individual Pages

### **Chapter 3**

Choosing Your Visual Assets

### **Chapter 4**

Don't Forget About Mobile Web Design

### **Chapter 5**

Accessible Web Design

### **Chapter 6**

Always Be Testing

What's the difference between website design and website development? The two go hand in hand, it's true — development abilities put limitations on design, and design requirements need certain characteristics of development. In short, design is how it looks and development is how it works.

But that's not to say that one is more important than the other. The goal of website design and website development are the same — to help visitors to your website find the information they need quickly and easily. [We've outlined a lot of the best practices for the web development side of the equation here](#), so feel free to explore those as well. But on this page, we're talking about design.

## **Chapter One: Taking The User On A Journey**

### *Information Architecture*

One of the most important aspects of website design is taking into account how the user will navigate around your site. This includes navigation within a page, navigation from page to page, and navigation between your site and outside links. It's a delicate balance — on the one hand, you want your design to nudge users in certain directions. On the other, you want your design to fit the directions your users are already inclined to go.

The underlying principle behind these habits is called “information architecture” — the way that you organize information in order to make it easier to find, understand, and use. Organizing a library shelf in alphabetical order is a very primitive form of information architecture, for example. The Dewey Decimal System is more sophisticated.

When it comes to websites, an information architect might conduct interviews or card sorting to find out what makes the most sense to users, then employ those strategies to set up menu structures and page layouts.

You probably don't have the time or means to do your own original information architecture research, but don't worry: that's why you came to the professionals. Years of research, case studies, and usage data have given



us a set of best practices that we use to build and customize websites so you don't have to start from a blank slate.

## *Global Navigation*

Navigation is the key to usability. It doesn't matter how many books are in that library if you can't find the one you want, and it doesn't matter how useful your site is if users can't find the information they need to succeed. The navigation on your website should revolve around simplicity, clarity, and consistency.

Simplicity means that the path from one page to another should be short and straightforward. In the past, designers employed the “three clicks rule” — it shouldn't take more than three clicks to get from one page to the next. Given the complexity of information on some modern websites (Amazon, for example), that's not always plausible. But the idea is sound — don't make it any more difficult to find information than it has to be.

Clarity means that your navigation should be self-evident. Links should look like links, buttons should look like buttons, and menu items should go where they say they go. Your users shouldn't have to guess which menu to use or which link to click on to find what they need.

Consistency plays into clarity. Part of making your navigation options obvious to your user is making sure that they always look the same. If clicking on the logo in the upper left corner takes you to the homepage from one page, it should do that from every page. Buttons should be styled the same. Menus should be persistent. It's all about making sure that your users know what to do intuitively, without guesswork.

Finally, don't forget about the “back” button. After the URL field, the “back” button is probably the most-clicked thing in any browser, and users have expectations about how it'll behave. Don't make the “back” button take them back to the top of the previous page if you can help it. They'll just have to scroll through content they've already seen, and they'll get frustrated.

## *Breadcrumb Navigation*

Breadcrumbs are a string of links, usually between the header and content on a page, that add context to the page a user is currently viewing.

Breadcrumbs are a secondary navigation method — while they should be clickable, the goal is to show the user the hierarchy of the page they're on within the site, not to guide them. If your users are using your breadcrumbs as the main way of getting around the site, you probably need to revisit the breadcrumbs, the menus, or both.

Another thing worth mentioning: don't use slashes to separate levels of a string of breadcrumbs unless you're absolutely sure that your product categories don't have slashes in them. Instead, use a greater-than sign, right-pointing arrow, or some other graphical separator. The idea is to make sure that the separator is visually distinct from the category name itself — as long as you're accomplishing that, you can use your imagination.

## *Search*

In today's world, you can't get away with not having a search function on your website. Even if you're not a retailer, some visitors will come to your website with the intention of finding a particular service, article, or resource, and you need to give them a way to find it.

Put the search box at the top of the page, where users expect to find it — the upper right corner is best. Don't try to be too cute with search boxes that only appear when you hover over them — users who want to search want to type in a query and hit enter, and that's it. Search boxes have become pretty standardized over the years — an obvious text box with a magnifying glass logo is fine.

The more content-rich your site is, the more prominent the search bar should be. Put it on every page — customers who are browsing a content-rich site and can't find what they need will resort to search, and they need to be able to find it from anywhere. Don't make the bar too small — [Nielsen Norman Group recommends that your search bar should hold at least 27 characters](#),

which would accommodate 90% of searches.

Finally, remember that you can adapt these practices over time, based on usage data. If customers aren't using long search queries, you can make the box smaller. If customers are using your breadcrumbs a lot, you might rethink your menu navigation. The beauty of a website is that it's fluid — if something isn't working, you can change it.

## **Chapter Two: Designing Individual Pages**

When designing individual pages on your website, the focus shifts slightly. You're not as concerned about helping the user find information as you are with helping them understand it. To do that, you'll want to think about content strategy.

### *Content Strategy*

The goal of content strategy is to focus on the goal of a page — what is the purpose of that page? Why did the user come to it? What are they hoping to get out of it? The amount and type of content that you put on a given page should reflect the answers to those questions.

Don't put too much content on one page — users who feel they have too much information in front of them will become overwhelmed and not know what to do. That's why lots of pages break their information into smaller chunks.

Think about checkout pages, for example. In most cases, you don't have to enter all your information in one giant form — that would be overwhelming. Instead, you fill out your mailing info, click "next," and then fill out payment information. Displaying no more than 5-7 input fields at a time keeps the information manageable.

You also don't want to confuse your users. Depending on your business, there's a good chance that people who come to your site don't know what you do or why they should care. Don't overwhelm them with industry jargon

and technical specifics right up front. You can put that information deep in the site for people that know the technical language and want to check on something specific, but any word a user doesn't understand is just making it harder to stay on your site.

Keep your content sections short. Unless you're trying to provide a detailed educational resource (like this one), you don't need to explain every little detail about a product or service. Use bullet points, step-by-step explanations, and graphics to make your content easier to understand.

## *Page Structure*

The idea behind page structure is to make it obvious where each element of your user interface is located on your layout. There aren't any hard and fast rules about page layout, but there are a few things you should keep in mind.

First, your structure should be predictable, both from one page to the next and when compared to similar websites. Your visitors spend a lot of time on the web and they've started to build expectations for where to find certain elements of a website or page — the search bar in the upper right corner that we mentioned earlier, for example. Browse similar sites in your space and see how they lay things out, then take cues from them that make sense for your site.

It's also helpful to lay out the page before you actually fill it with content. Use grids and a low-fidelity wireframe, filled with placeholders for images, buttons, and text. Every element you add complicates your design, so a wireframe will give you the best look at whether your page is too cluttered. Analyze the wireframe, assess whether each element is necessary, and make adjustments before you actually fill the page with content.

## *Visual Hierarchy*

People don't generally read every word on a page to find the information they need — they scan it quickly until they find the link or piece of content they're looking for. Your job is to help them find it, and visual hierarchy is a big

part of that job.

Visual hierarchy refers to the practice of arranging the pieces of a web page in a way that clearly indicates importance — which pieces of the page the visitor should focus on first, second, and so on. This makes the page easier to scan.

Visitors tend to scan top to bottom and left to right. On text-heavy pages like blogs and pillar pages, visitors scan in an F-shaped pattern — left to right along one horizontal, then down to the next horizontal. On more image-centric pages, visitors scan in a Z-shaped pattern, quickly scanning across and down the page.

You'll also want to prioritize the most important parts of a page: navigation, titles, forms, and key buttons should stand out so that the eye is drawn to them. A good trick for testing your page is to take a screenshot and blur it in Photoshop such that the text can't be read. If the key components still stand out, you're in the right track.

## *Scrolling*

There's a persistent myth that users don't scroll — the idea that content should be “above the fold,” or visible without scrolling, is stubborn. But this idea is misguided. First of all, the wide range of screen sizes, window sizes, and devices that a page is viewed on means that there's no set boundary for where the “fold” is. Secondly, data indicates that [many customers start scrolling before the page has even fully loaded](#) — the very top of the page is actually less viewed than parts lower down.

Given that your visitors are going to scroll anyway, you don't need to prioritize important content at the top of the page. Instead, think of the area above the fold like the cover of a book. The initial impression of your site happens above the fold, so that area needs to set the impression and expectation of quality for visitors. The top of the page should serve as an introduction to tell visitors what the page is about, encouraging them to keep scrolling downward.



When visitors scroll down a long page, however, they don't want to have to scroll all the way back up. They want to be able to remember which page they're on and retain the ability to navigate elsewhere. That's where persistent navigation is a good option. A sticky menu keeps the visitor oriented by showing their location at all times.

Finally, don't hijack scrolling. It's tempting to put flashy graphics on a page such that scrolling advances an animation or moves the elements behind the content, but users expect scrolling to move them quickly up and down the page. Let them control their movement through the site the way they want.

## *Content Loading*

Content should load quickly. If visitors have to wait too long for a page to load, whether the slowdown is at your end or due to their connection, they'll give up and go somewhere else. For some useful tips on how to optimize your site to load faster, check out our [Website Development page](#).

Since no site can load instantly, it's useful to give visitors some visual feedback that the site is loading as planned. One way to do that is with a skeleton screen — a temporarily blank version of the page that bigger content, like photos and video, gradually loads into. A skeleton screen directs users' attention to actual progress and lets them anticipate the elements that haven't loaded yet.

Infinite scrolling pages aren't very common, but if you do employ one, it's a good idea to add a simple visual element to indicate that more content is on the way. Scroll to the bottom of Tumblr or Pinterest — you'll see a simple animated logo that clearly shows visitors that there's more content to come.

## *Buttons*

Buttons are a great way to break up blocks of text and create a smooth conversational flow without requiring visitors to visit another page entirely.

Basically, buttons should look like buttons. Just as web visitors are accustomed to being able to click on any underlined text, since that's what a link looks like, they're accustomed to certain things from buttons. Don't use visual elements like rectangles, outlines, blocks of color, or other highlights that look like buttons, but aren't.

On the flipside, clickable things should look clickable. It's tempting to design a site with a very minimal, clean look — no bright colors or blocky elements — but your visitors are going to need to know how to use the site in the first place. If your CTAs, menu items, or other clickable elements aren't obvious, they won't get used.

Buttons should be consistent in their appearance as well. If your buttons are icons, they should all be icons. If you opt for text instead, they should all be text. That consistency will not only make for a better-looking design, but it'll also make the experience of browsing your site more familiar — users who move to a new page will already know what to expect when they get there.

Finally, label buttons according to what they do — don't get too fancy with your own custom icons, and don't get too cute with buttons that have vague labels like “Let's Go!” or “Sounds Good!” Users should know exactly what a button does and where it leads just by looking at it — save the personal flair for the rest of the site.

## **Chapter Three: Choosing Your Visual Assets**

One of the most important aspects of website design is how your content looks on the site. There's no single best way to set up your visual assets — that will vary based on your business, your brand identity, and the message you're trying to convey — but there are a few best practices you should keep in mind.

### *Copy and Font*

We're not talking about the actual content of your copy here — more about the way it's presented. First, you'll want to pick a font. It's possible that your

logo already includes a typeface or wordmark of some kind, but don't just assume that that's the font you'll use for body copy. More likely, your wordmark will be a bolder, more eye-catching font that's better suited for titles and buttons than big blocks of text.

As for body copy, there's long been a debate about whether you should use serif or sans-serif font. In case you need a refresher on your typography terms, the serif is the little decorative flourish that extends from the end of a character on some typefaces. Serifs appear on all kinds of characters and in all kinds of type families, and come in a variety of different styles. Times New Roman, long the default font in Microsoft Office products, is an example.

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff

Generally speaking, serifs are considered to look more formal, elegant, classy, and luxurious. Sans-serif fonts (fonts without serifs), by contrast, are considered more modern, friendly, direct, clean, and minimal. Helvetica is a classic example of a modern sans-serif font — even though it's over 60 years old.

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff

There have been plenty of back-and-forth debates about the “readability” of serif versus sans-serif fonts, where they should be used, and whether they're right for your brand — [Design Shack has a good breakdown of the arguments around fonts](#) — but the practical upshot is that you should use whatever font feels right for your brand.

Whatever you do, make sure you test your typeface. Paste a big block of text into that font and see how it looks. Is it easy to read quickly? Do certain words look strange? What about all-caps sections, bold and italic, numbers, and special characters? Make sure a font works for your purposes before you start creating copy in it.

Don't forget about white space. “Leading” (pronounced “ledding”) is the space

between each line in a block of text, and it can make the difference between a clean-looking page and a cluttered mess. A good designer's trick is to increase the leading in a block of text until it looks strange, then decrease it until it looks good again.

And finally, break up your text with paragraph breaks. Scroll back up this page and notice that no paragraph is more than a few lines long. That serves two purposes: first, you don't get lost between line breaks and you're not overwhelmed by the amount of text. Secondly, it's easier to skim the page for something you read earlier and want to find again.

## *Colors*

Choosing the right colors for your web page is at least as difficult as choosing the right font — if not more so. You want your colors to spice up the page without distracting from the content. Poke around the web and you'll find a practically infinite number of stories about how McDonalds' red walls make people eat faster, the blue of Bed Bath & Beyond keeps you calm so you'll browse longer, or the brown of a UPS truck is reassuring and conveys reliability.

Unfortunately, that's not true. Color is simply too personal to have universal applicability, and you can see that reflected in highly competitive markets. Take power tools, for example. Ryobi tools are lime green. Milwaukee tools are a deep red. Makita tools are teal. DeWalt tools are yellow. Kobalt tools are royal blue.

Is one of those colors more inherently associated with power tools, ruggedness, reliability, strength, or any of the other characteristics a shopper might want from their next drill or saw? Of course not, especially if someone has a good experience with one brand and a bad experience with another.

And that's not to mention the fact that there are only so many broad color categories and thousands upon thousands of brands. Green can signify health (Simply Juice), money (mint), environmental friendliness (Seventh Generation), or ruggedness (John Deere, Land Rover). Examples are endless.

The truth is that, like fonts, colors are subjective. There's no definitive questionnaire you can take about your brand's personality that will tell you what colors to use — you'll have to experiment and figure it out for yourself.

What we can tell you about color is to not go overboard. Color should be considered decoration, not substance — it's a way to draw the eye to a particular part of a page or to call attention to one page in particular.

You also shouldn't have too many colors. Your brand and logo will almost certainly have a main color and a secondary color, with possibly a third highlight color and an "official" shade of gray. Stick to those. Don't try to get too creative with color-coding your menus, pages, or other visual assets. It'll just start to look confusing.

## *Imagery and Photos*

Humans are visual creatures. There's a reason web pages aren't just white text on a black background anymore, and that's because photos, graphics, and other visuals make a huge difference in how we perceive a site, even if everything else is the same.

The images you use on your site should be relevant, even if they're relatively vague. If you're talking about website design, the header image should have something to do with the web or with design. You could use a nice-looking generic image of a hardwood table or a brick wall, but it doesn't mean anything, so it'll just cause confusion.

When you're picking images, don't just use generic photos of people. You'll see advice that says "don't use stock photos," but that's too broad — stock photography has come a long way, and you can easily find good imagery that you don't take yourself [[link to MTM blog post "How To Find Images For Your Blog"](#) — can't find it online].

The problem with using stock photos of people is that when humans see faces, we immediately start to connect with them. If the face we're connecting to is just some random stock photo model, it feels artificial. You



know the types of photos we're talking about — a group of business-casual-clad people in a brightly-lit room, smiling at nothing in particular. Avoid those photos.

Make sure your images are high-resolution. It's a battle between the visual appearance of a photo, especially with today's high-res screens, and the loading speed of your site, but a blurry or pixelated image is worse than not providing an image at all. Make sure your images are properly sized for thumbnails, headers, and anywhere else they appear, and don't stretch or compress them from their original aspect ratio.

## *On-Site Videos*

Videos are getting more and more popular on sites, especially as browsing speeds increase and load times go down. Video is a great way to convey emotion and really give your visitors a feel for your product or service in a way that text or even imagery can't — as long as you use it correctly.

Audio on your video should be off by default, with the option to turn it on. Exceptions can be made for videos that live on their own pages such that anyone who clicks on that link is expecting a video, but in any other case, start your videos in mute. No one likes suddenly blaring music on a crowded bus or in a quiet office, and they might be annoyed enough to just turn the video off and abandon the page entirely.

Keep your promo videos short — somewhere in the range of two to three minutes. Any longer than that and people will get bored and not finish the video.

Consider an alternative way to access the content. The difficulty of doing so will depend on the content in the video itself, but there will always be visitors who, for whatever reason, can't watch a video at the moment they're visiting. If there's no alternative, they simply can't access that information. Consider captions, a transcript, or a summary of the video below it to help out people who can't watch right away.

## *Call-to-Action (CTA) Buttons*

A call to action (CTA) is a button designed to guide your site visitors to a specific conversion goal. That might be a sale, a form, or just another page, but in any case, they have to get noticed. CTAs are usually visually distinct from the rest of the elements on the page, and contain a short snippet of text like “download the whitepaper” or “contact us.”

CTAs should be big enough to stand out from the body text, but not so big that they distract from the rest of the page. The page itself is trying to set up the CTA, so you want visitors to read the content first — asking visitors to “get a free quote” doesn’t help if they don’t know what the quote is for, so you want the pitch to come first.

CTAs are a good chance to use the highlight colors we talked about earlier. A splash of color on a mostly white page will get noticed, even if the CTA isn’t much bigger than the other text surrounding it. Pick a color that contrasts with the main colors you use on your page.

Finally, make use of negative space around a CTA to distinguish it from the rest of the elements on a page. Whether that space is white or takes the form of an image, a visual break between the body copy and the CTA text creates breathing room and separates the CTA from the rest of the page.

To test a CTA on a page, try blurring out the page in your design software. Does the CTA still stand out, even when the text is too blurry to be read? That means you’re on the right track.

## *Web Forms*

Most business websites will have a form on them somewhere, whether you’re generating leads before someone downloads a whitepaper or getting shipping and payment info when a customer makes a purchase. The form will usually live toward the end of the visitor’s journey through your site, so you want your users to be able to get through them quickly and easily.

First of all, don't ask for more than you need. Every extra field you add to a form will make it more intimidating and annoying to your visitors, so think hard about how useful the information will be before you solicit it.

Remember to put the form in a logical order, too. Web visitors have become accustomed to a certain order that fields are presented in, and the form will make more sense to them if you stick to that order. Name comes before address. Username comes before password. Shipping information comes before billing information. And so on.

## **Chapter Four: Don't Forget About Mobile Web Design**

Mobile browsing accounts for [almost half of web browsing worldwide](#), and that number is only growing. What that means is that if your website doesn't work on mobile, you're leaving half of your potential visitors behind.

### *Responsive Web Design*

Unfortunately for you, there are thousands of different devices out there that might be viewing your page, each with their own size, resolution, and aspect ratio. Fortunately for you, there is an equally large number of resources to help you design for all of them.

Most mobile-optimized sites should aim for a single-column layout. A single column helps manage space on small screens, as well as easily scaling to any width of screen and between portrait and landscape orientations.

On limited screen real estate, it'll be more important than ever to prioritize what's displayed on screen and what's hidden behind menu buttons and "more" buttons. Think about what you want users to see when they first arrive on your site, and tuck the less important elements behind the scenes.

Remember to scale your images accordingly. When designers build responsive websites, they usually use something called "breakpoints" to tell the website which version of an image to load from the server. If the screen you're viewing the site on is less than a certain number of pixels wide, a

smaller image is loaded, which cuts down on data usage and load times. [Tools like the Responsive Image Breakpoints Generator](#) are great for planning out your visual assets for mobile.

Finally, remember that people aren't navigating your mobile site with a mouse — they're using their fingers. That means that buttons, menus, and links don't just need to be "clickable," they need to be "tappable" as well. A good rule of thumb is to make tappable elements no smaller than 10 x 10 millimeters to allow them to stand out enough to touch.

Remember also that there's no such thing as "hovering" on mobile. Users on desktop can hover their mouse over an element to see if the cursor changes or some text pops up indicating interactivity, but mobile users don't have that option. Your design elements need to make it obvious at a glance whether they can be interacted with or not.

## ***Chapter Five: Accessible Web Design***

Everyone's online these days, regardless of abilities. What that means is that you need to design for users with impairments as well as the completely able-bodied.

For example, lots of people have impaired vision, but they'll still need to use the web. Gray-on-gray text, low contrast images, and dark pages are hard to read for people with visual impairments, who will simply abandon your site if they can't make out what it says.

The problem is even more pronounced on mobile. Mobile users might be browsing while walking in bright sunlight, with glare from a window, or any number of other unfavorable lighting conditions. Reading dark text on a dark background is hard enough on a desktop — it's practically impossible on mobile. Good visual design isn't just for people with impairments — it's for everyone. Want to know if your design makes the cut? [WebAIM has a handy color checker](#) to see if your foreground and background colors have enough contrast for their various standards.

Don't forget about the colorblind. It's an affliction that isn't talked about much, but colorblindness affects almost 1 in 12 people. Color blindness is complicated, but most colorblind people have deficiencies in either the red or green areas of their eyes, as the [NFL discovered several years ago when they introduced their "Color Rush" uniforms](#).

That doesn't mean that you can't use red and green elements in your design, of course. Just don't set them against each other in contrast. More importantly, don't use color alone to indicate information, as with many online forms that say something like "the fields marked in red are required." The addition of a checkmark, underline, or bolded text will help call attention to the relevant areas for users who can't tell by color alone.

Finally, consider blind users in your design. Blind web users are a small part of the population, but they still should be considered.

When a blind person browses the web, they rely on special devices called screen readers which read them the text on the page. Make sure that your descriptions are detailed enough that a screen reader can accurately convey the information that a blind visitor might need.

Additionally, you should put useful alternative text on all "meaningful" images — images that aren't just for decoration but contribute usefully to the content on the page. Screen readers will pick up on that alt text and read it aloud so that blind users can better understand what's on the page. As an added bonus, alt text on important images is scraped by search engines, so it helps your site out either way.

## **Chapter Six: Always Be Testing**

Testing is an integral part of the process. Not only should you be testing your site before it goes live, but you should test as your site grows, changes, and evolves. Measure which parts of the site are being used, which parts aren't working, and which parts are struggling, and adapt accordingly.



## *Test Loading Speed*

According to Nielsen Norman Group, there are three important time limits to keep in mind. The first is 0.1 seconds. Any element that loads in 0.1 seconds or faster feels instant to the visitor. The second time limit is 1 second — that's fast enough that the visitor's train of thought isn't interrupted but slow enough that they notice a delay. Any longer than 1 second, and you should probably consider a loading icon or skeleton screen to keep the user's attention. The final barrier is 10 seconds. Elements that take more than 10 seconds to load will fully lose the user's attention, and may make them leave the site entirely.

Slowdowns in load time can be caused by a lot of different factors — [you can read more about optimizing speeds on our Website Development page](#) — but speed needs to be a priority for any website, regardless of content.

## *A/B Testing*

A/B testing is a common tool in lots of marketing contexts, and web design is no exception. A/B testing is especially useful when you're struggling to decide between two different designs for a site, like an existing page or a redesigned version.

With A/B testing, one version of the site is shown at random to half of your users, while the other half see the other version of the site. From there, you can analyze clickthrough, conversion, time on page, or any other metric that you care about to see which version of the site is producing the best results.

A/B testing can be used on any element of a site, from something small like the color of a button to something large like a full redesign of your menu structure. This type of testing can also be layered — once you've picked a winner from your first A/B test, make small adjustments to the winner and test those as well. There's no limit to the amount of testing, analyzing, and tweaking you can do on your website to make the best possible experience for your users.

## *The Bottom Line*

Web design is an extremely complicated aspect of your brand and your marketing, but it's also extremely important. In today's connected, digital world, you simply can't afford not to have a website.

And as with any aspect of design, these pieces of advice are just that — advice. There are no hard and fast rules for what a website should look like or how it should work, and the needs of your company and your users will inform the decisions you make.

That's why it's so important to never think of your website as finished. Mix and match the elements that you find useful from this article. Test them, then test them again. Examine both back-end analytics and solicited user feedback to determine what's working and what's not, and adjust accordingly. And remember that your website isn't just for you — it's for your customers.