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Your Web Site

If there is a single rule to guide the effective development of a commercial Web site, it is not to let functional opportunity be the leading consideration. You have to remember that simply being able to do something is never a good enough reason for doing it. It's that old "if everybody else jumped off a bridge" logic.

Since the dawn of commercial Web sites, there has been a steady succession of trends that have either done well or badly for their implementors, depending on a host of factors. Remember animated logos, Flash intros, landing pages, slide shows and the like? They each took over the Web in their day, but did not necessarily do much to drive business – which should have been the goal.

What does work on the Web is anything that enables choice and provides satisfaction.

Web sites are inherently passive in that they present themselves for the consideration of visitors who then choose whether to click or not. At their most effective they invite consideration (through design and content) and encourage navigation (which is the interactive part.) When the visitor starts navigating your site, he or she is making choices that are driven by curiosity and expectation. Your site should be structured to meet curiosity with information and expectation with experience. All of which requires a content structure that anticipates the interests of the people whose attention you hope to capture.

The trick to doing it right is to remember that, having lived with rapidly transitioning technology for going on 20 years now, the medium is not the message. The message is the message. And the sole purpose of any commercial Web site is to get the message to as broad an audience as possible in a manner that inspires responses that will help your business to thrive.

What does this mean? You can render your site immune to distracting trends by building it on the basis of a communications strategy. One that matches your business intent with the interests of the targeted audience. If the 6 most important pieces of information about your company, for instance, are written in stone, you probably don't need the ability to personally update your home page on an ongoing basis. In fact, updatability on the Web is only a factor when you are comfortable with producing and distributing new content on a regular basis. If your clients tend to look for key information from within predictable categories, you may want to use those categories as your primary navigational structure.

Working with clients, I tend not to talk about the site as a thing unto itself, but rather as a tool for creating information flow and relationships.