9 Aesthetics: Useful Advice for Creating an Attractive Website

introduction:

laws of attraction

Once the content of a website is established, the site's creators must consider features of the website that will attract users and encourage them to revisit the site in the future. These features include providing easy navigation, displaying the names of people and organizations behind the site's creation, including pictures and other graphics, and making it overall aesthetically pleasing. Equally important to making the website attractive is taking the necessary steps to spread the word about the website. Even an easy to use, informative, credible, and attractive site will be underutilized if it is not well advertised. This chapter will discuss what research says about making a website aesthetically pleasing, as well as what the necessary supplements are for online map mashups for making sure those who will benefit from them know of their existence.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: IS THE WEBSITE AESTHETICALLY PLEASING?

Whether or not a website is considered aesthetically pleasing is obviously a subjective judgment. Every individual has his or her own opinion on what is attractive (or unattractive) in website design, so attempting to formulate guidelines for creating attractive web pages is a difficult task. However, some research has been successful in helping us understand how and why individuals develop opinions on the visual characteristics of objects (including websites). Based on the findings of research on aesthetic preferences, we can derive a few basic guidelines to help instruct our attempts to create websites that are most universally attractive.

GRAPHICS Berlyne (1971) took a behaviorist approach and compared the arousal individuals' reticular systems on specific subcategories of aesthetics defined by Berlyne himself, such as complexity and novelty, to the Wundt curve (also referred to as the "arousal curve") to explain aesthetic preferences in psychological terms.

Photograph from the SmartChoices Homepage
Lourdes Fonseca, of ConnCAN, felt that including a picture of a school-aged child would encourage parents to use school choice information sources like SmartChoices, by reminding them who the extra time they take to research schools will benefit: their children.

Other researchers criticized Berlyne's conclusion, including Crozier (1994), who claimed the explanation focused too much on the physical appearance of the objects and ignored their meanings and functions. As an alternative approach, Schenkman, B., & Jönsson (2000) explain that aesthetics can be considered through the science of evolutionary psychology, in which "the appreciation of beauty is seen as hard-wired into our genetic set-up and the aesthetic feeling fulfils an adaptive, biological function" (p. 368). Their research looked at web users' first visual impressions of websites, what the users' aesthetic preferences were, and what factors determined their overall impressions of the websites. They found that "aesthetic communication," or how an individual feels about what the are looking at, involves not only its physical properties, but also syntactic factors, such as its function or the "decoding processes" used by the individual when looking at it. Like the early critics of Berlyne's (1971) claims, these findings support the notion that the degree to which an individual finds something aesthetically pleasing involves the object's function and interaction with the individual.
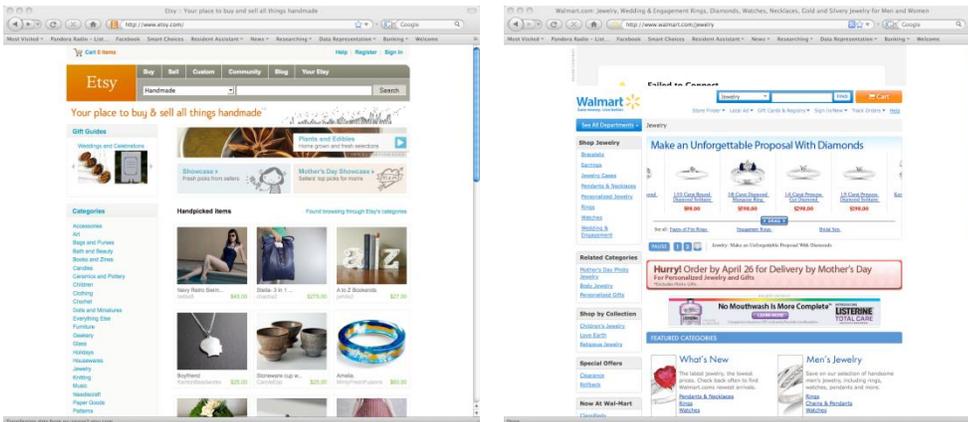
Which Site is More Attractive?
These two jewelry websites mean to serve the same purpose: to sell jewelry to online shoppers. The first, *etsy.com*, is a popular website that provides a place for individual artisans to showcase and sell handcrafted jewelry and other gifts. The second, *walmart.com/jewelry*, is a portion of Wal-Mart's larger website dedicated to jewelry sales. Notice that the Etsy site includes more pictures than text, whereas the Wal-Mart site includes more text than pictures. Which site is more attractive? (Etsy Inc., 2009), (Wal-Mart Stores Inc., 2009).

Based on the results of their research, Schenkman and Jonsson recommend improving the first impression of a website by including more illustrations than text (while also keeping in mind the amount of time needed for many graphics to load over different connection speeds, as discussed in Chapter 8). Following this advice, our first two guidelines for aesthetics are:

①Use photographs and other graphics related to the topic of the website.

②Strike a balance between the number of graphics and the amount of text on each page – visually, they should be

balanced. Individuals should not have to be inundated with words as soon as they reach the website.

FONT In addition to graphics, font type also deserves consideration. In his 1963 publication Interaction of Color, Josef Albers, considered "one of the most influential artist-educators of the twentieth century" (Yale University Press, 2009), responded to the current fad of using "simplified" typeface, saying:

The concept that "the simpler the form of a letter the simpler its reading" was an obsession of beginning constructivism. It became something like a dogma, and is still followed by "modernistic" typographers.

This notion has proved to be wrong, because in reading we do not read letters, but words as a whole, as a "word picture." Opthalmology has disclosed that the more the letters are differentiated from each other, the easier is the reading.

Without going into comparisons and the details, it should be realized that words consisting of only capital letters present the most difficult reading—because of their equal height, equal volume, and, with most, their equal width. When comparing serif letters with sans-serif, the latter provide an uneasy reading. The fashionable preference for sans-serif in text shows neither historical nor practical competence."

(Albers, 2006)

This fad continues today, with a plethora of available sans-serif fonts that come standard on Microsoft Word 2008.

From Albers's advice, we derive our third guideline for website aesthetics:

③ Use a serif font for text that is longer than a few words, as serif fonts are easier to read. Sans-serif fonts are best kept for brief headings or titles.

COLOR Color, too, plays an integral role in the aesthetics of a website. Garishly colored webpages are perhaps aggravated by the effects of a glowing computer screen.

Psychologist David McClelland summarizes the effects of certain sensory stimuli, including color, on incentives in his book *Human Motivation*. He writes:

Certain types of colors, sounds, and physical contact seem to be innately pleasing and sought, whereas others are displeasing. For instance, softness and smoothness are more pleasant than

Serif and Sans-Serif Fonts
The two fonts shown above are examples of a serif and a sans-serif font. The first is Bookman Antiqua, a serif font so called for its little "wings" on the end of the strokes of the characters. The sans-serif font shown underneath is Arial, a ubiquitous font among consumer level word processors.

stiffness, roughness, and coarseness (Berlyne, 1967). Aside from these qualitative differences, psychologists beginning with Wundt (1874) have long noted that as stimulus intensity in any modality increases from low to moderate levels the effect is pleasant, whereas if it increases to still higher levels the effect is unpleasant. Thus, tones and lights of moderate intensity generally are sought out over tones and lights of great intensity or very low intensity.

(McClelland, 1988)

In his book *Envisioning Information*, Edward Tufte writes:

Color can improve the information resolution of a computer screen. First, by softening the bright-white background, color calms video glare, the effect of staring at a light bulb…Color defines edges and allows a simple and elegant de-gridded *design. For faming fields, the appropriate color should be light in value…and, at the same time, relatively intense and saturated (to give a strong visual signal for an active window. Yellow is the only color that satisfies this joint requirement. Thus, a two-dimensional display task is handled by two visual dimensions of a single color.*

(Tufte E. R., 1990)

From this, we derive our fourth, fifth, and sixth guidelines for pursuing aestheticism:

④ Use color to highlight boundaries and edges

⑤ Consider viewers who may be color blind by avoiding the use of colors of similar intensities placed atop each other, as is shown in the example at right.

DID THE USERS GET WHAT THEY CAME FOR? Generally, users who have not found what they are looking for after roughly two clicks, tend to move on (Waterson et al., 2002; Lazar et al., 2003; . To avoid this, a website should be tested by members of the target audience to check its navigational user-friendliness.

Additionally, Vaiana and McGlynn (2002) list four pieces of information that viewers need to know in order to successfully utilize top-down processing:

1. *what the information they are encountering is designed to do,*
2. *why they should be interested in it,*
3. *how the information "fits" with other pieces of information they have or need, and*
4. *how the information is organized*

<div align="right">(Vaiana & McGlynn, 2002)</div>

So how do we ensure that users are able to easily find what they need?

❶ make certain that the website homepage explains its purpose and what novel service it provides its users

❷ make the structure of the website reflect the top-down processing. To do this, make sure that users can figure out where they are at all times, best done by including a consistent navigation bar at the top or left side of all pages

❸ design the site so that the color of links that have already been visited appear in a different color. Doing this takes any ambiguity out of what pages the viewers have already visited, which helps avoid revisiting the same page multiple times in search of the same information.

❹ Follow the rules outlined in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 to promote the website's intuitiveness, accessibility, and usefulness

IS YOUR WEBSITE CREDIBLE? (AND IF SO, DID YOU REMEMBER TO TELL YOUR USERS?) Website users want to be assured that what they are reading is credible. According to Ben Schneiderman's *Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines*, the most important steps that website creators can take to ensure credibility are to:

- *Provide a useful set of frequently asked questions (FAQ) and answers;*
- *Ensure the Web site is arranged in a logical way;*
- *Provide articles containing citations and references;*
- *Show author's credentials;*
- *Ensure the site looks professionally designed;*
- *Provide an archive of past content (where appropriate);*
- *Ensure the site is as up to date as possible;*
- *Provide links to outside sources and materials; and*
- *Ensure the site is frequently linked to by other credible sites*
                                        (Schneiderman, 2006)

Readers want to know where the information they are reading is coming from – and they want to know without having to dig for it. A website that displays its sources and creators proudly and prominently exhibits not only a higher level of transparency, but displays greater confidence in the information you are providing.