



TODAY'S WEB DESIGN REQUIRES A STRATEGIC APPROACH

BY RAND KRAMER

For a long time, Web design was created in a vacuum where attractive design caught the attention of Web surfers, but it rarely engaged them in the content of the site. Without solid content, viewers left as quickly as they arrived.

As we enter the next threshold of the Web's evolution, Web design has increasingly merged with content management and other functions because of the greater expectations of users. They want a greater depth of information, faster accessibility, e-commerce capability, streaming video, and all the other benefits that come with faster connections, integration with back-end databases, and better security. It's no longer enough to create a visual design, even one filled with motion that captures viewer interest and wins awards. To do so risks having a significantly reduced role in Web site development.

Avoiding this future does not mean having to go back to school and completely re-tool to attain more technical skills. However, it does mean gaining a broader understanding of a site's users, what functions they require and how they consume content. Knowing users better allows designers to improve functionality with not only information storage and retrieval, but also the processes, workflows and navigation that improve the user experience and encourage repeat visits. How will users interact with database information? Will it be different depending on their role? How should a shopping cart checkout process be defined?

Answering these questions leads to information design, the term most often applied to Web site building today. Representing a conglomeration of Web elements, information design combines the organizational and navigational traits of information architecture, the embedded user behaviors, workflow, transactions, and functions that comprise interaction design, and the graphical elements and consistent design conventions that are part of interface design.

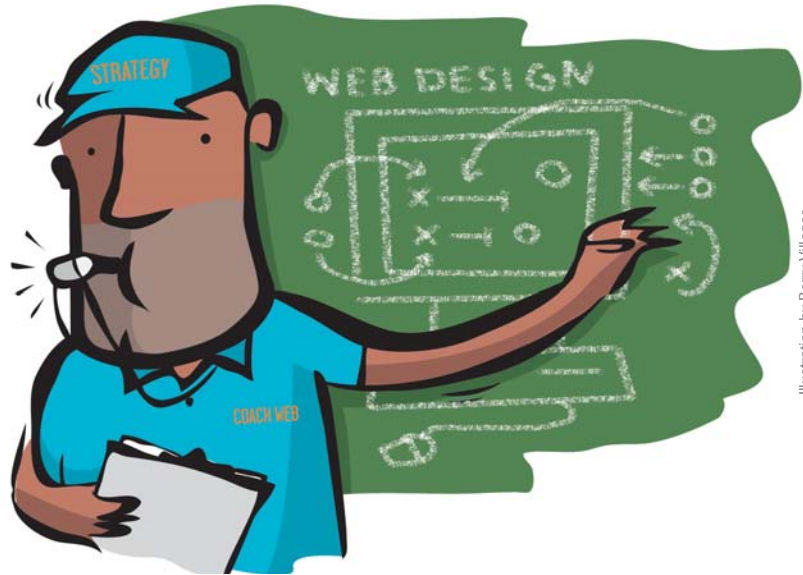


Illustration by Berry Villegas

In addition to knowing sound principles of information design, astute designers are learning how to design for content management systems so that working with information remains separate from the presentation layer of a site. Video, documents stored as Word files, PDFs, or spreadsheets, and most other information can be easily stored and accessed as pages, but users may only require some parts of each page depending on their query or relationship with the site. Why give them much more content than they need and tax the system unnecessarily?

Creating code separate from content allows pages to be assembled as needed and loaded more quickly by assembling page design on the fly. A flexible content management capability is especially important for handheld devices that already sell more than personal computers and automobiles combined. Users like them because of their mobility, so getting the appropriate information and page design from them is just another step toward the goal of a positive user experience.

Designers don't need to be skilled in all the details of information architecture, content management, technology integration, and user experience, but they do need to be familiar with the concepts, know where they intersect,

and be part of a team that brings all these capabilities to bear on a Web project. That is how the designer's role will continue to add value to clients and their projects.

Sure, a critical element of design will always be creating interfaces that are easy to use and understand. Use of specific fonts, colors, textures, or whole style sheets will support the hierarchy of information and lead to a call for action, such as a button saying "Buy Now!" But this can only happen to the extent that it supports the brand, and most importantly the user experience. Awards can always be won for interface design, but approaching a project from an information-design perspective opens up many more possibilities for recognition and repeat business. ■

Rand Kramer is the creative director at Siteworx (www.siteworx.com), a Web design, applications and integration firm in Reston, VA. The recipient of several design awards, including one Gold and two Silver INVISION Awards, a Webby Award, and a Yahoo Daily Pick, Kramer formulated and instituted Siteworx's signature design and creative methodology for Web site success. Among his credits are the creative behind the site redesigns at United Press International, Cochlear, Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies, and the Public Broadcasting System. He can be reached at rand@siteworx.com.