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Tips for a Professional Website Part1
By Dennis McDonough

Having a web site is now essential for business. Without a web site, you have one less way to reach a huge number of potential customers who are looking for you. And an effective, professionally-designed web site is your key to reaching those customers.

You are a professional. You use professional services and have high expectations of them. So it makes sense to hire a professional web site design team who has experience (and a variety of sites to prove it) and who can: work effectively with you in developing a web site, understand your needs and goals, optimize site search capabilities, and make your site stand out from all the others *all while working within your budget*.

What to Look For in a Good Design Team

Experience – We all probably know someone whose son's friend knows someone down the street who is studying web design at night, and who would love to pick up a few extra dollars doing a web site for you. But he or she may not have the demonstrated experience necessary to create an effective web site. You want a professional web design team that has a range of experience, from basic text-and-picture sites to e-commerce applications.

Creativity – There are several designers who use "canned" web sites where they simply dump information into pre-formatted templates so that every site they create looks vaguely similar. A good web design team knows that in order to be effective and work for you, your site must be like no other. That doesn't mean they come up with bizarre designs just to catch a visitor's attention. It means they can work with you to develop a site that is distinctly yours. It also means they have the design tools available to immediately execute any changes you have and help you expand your site as your needs change.

Efficiency – You want to find a web design team that can work efficiently for you, help you set a budget, and work to make your web site cost-effective. You do not want to work with a design team that takes a "kitchen sink" approach to site design, overcharging you for filling your site with animations, pictures strewn all about the site in inappropriate places, and tons of unnecessary downloads. You *do* want to work with a team that discusses your needs in advance and builds a site that reflects them. In short, you want to work with a team that will not waste your money.

What to Ask Design Team Candidates

Once you begin to shop around for a design team using the guidelines above, ask the following questions to those who want your business:

What is your strongest skill and how will you use it for me? If the web design shop is great with photographs, then they will probably emphasize those on your site. If they are good with writing, then
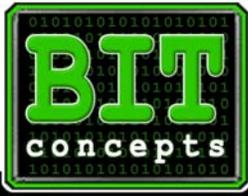
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your site will have clear, snappy text. Again, you have to keep in mind your own web site needs are when you ask this.

What is the web site design process? Will there be interaction between you and the web design team, or will they just know what you need and start making a site? Will they keep you updated regularly and present site elements for your approval, or unveil the complete web site when it is ready? What will it take to achieve your goals? Remember that frequent feedback is best, so you may want to go with the team that interacts with you every step of the way.

What has been your biggest site design challenge? Rarely does a site design process run smoothly, and there are problems encountered every step of the way. By asking this you want to see how the design firm solves problems. Who knows? Designing a site for your business may be the most challenging task they ever encounter. If so, and you have a satisfactory answer to this question, then you will have confidence that they will meet the challenges and develop a fine site for you.

How can you optimize my website to make it searchable?   If someone is looking for your business on the Internet, they will use a search engine such as Google, Alta Vista, or Ask Jeeves among others. Your web design team should have every page on your site set so that your company comes up in a high position on a search engine's results page. If they cannot explain how they can do that, you probably will not want to use them. If they can explain, get them to show you how by using some of their own work as an example.

How can my website grow and evolve? As with most things you will find some success and some failures with different ideas on your web site. Someone may think a chat room is just the thing your customers are wanting, but 6 months later you have found that no one is using it. How will changes affect the design and layout of your site? Can the menus grow easily? Will you be able to match the look and feel with new features?

Other questions you might ask: How many people work for you? Does each member of your team complete a task for the site, or does one person do everything for a site? What awards have your sites won? What brought you into this business in the first place? What keeps you in it?

Once you have selected a web site design team, you must keep in touch with them throughout the site development process. If someone on the team calls with a question or wants you to see something they have done, return the call as soon as possible. Keep the feedback channels open and work with the developer to get the web site you want. And once the site is ready and working for you, keep in touch with the design team so you can both anticipate changes and discuss enhancements.

Follow these guidelines to create and maintain a happy relationship with your design team, and get a professionally-designed web site that works for you.
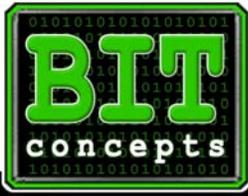
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More Tips for a Professional Website Part2
By Dennis McDonough

Websites: there are good ones, bad ones, and flat-out ugly ones. Which one is yours?

Having a web site is now essential for business, but it does no good if your website suffers from bad or amateurish design. While the computer technology operating behind the Web may intimidate some people, they still have eyes that can ache if the web site they're viewing has hot pink text on a red background. Likewise, they will also leave a website if the design prohibits them from finding the information for which they are looking.

In short, you can't draw and keep customers with a badly-designed web site.

Last issue we discussed what you should look for when selecting a professional web design team. This time, we'll discuss some of what actually constitutes good and bad design. The distinction is not as subjective as it might seem. There is room on the Internet for all kinds of artistic expression, but it also serves the needs of business-to-business or business-to-customer communication. Basic business communication rules apply to web sites the same as they do to brochures or even business letters.

Let's put it another way: Would you send out a letter in pink text printed on red paper? Don't commit the same error in thinking about your web site design.

Listen to the Pros

Your professional web site design team has the tools and expertise to create an efficient web site that will be easy to find, easy to navigate, look good, and will contain all the information you need to have available in order for people to do business with you. However, they can only help you realize your "vision" for a web site if you have clear idea of what constitutes good web design and information flow.
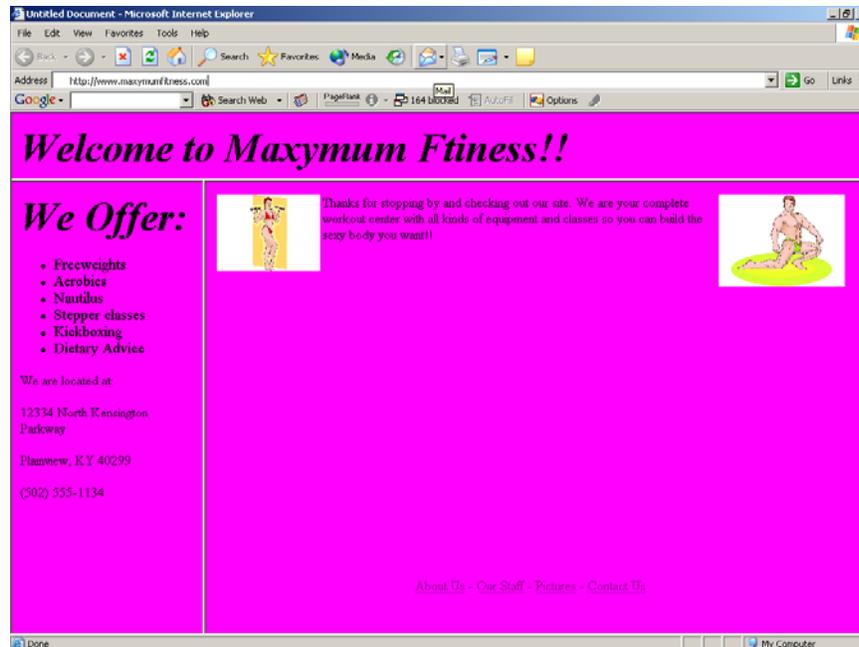
But just as some people have a "tin ear" for music, some have a "tin eye" for design, and there is an abundance of sites on the web that are designed by people with tin eyes. Take a look at this example.
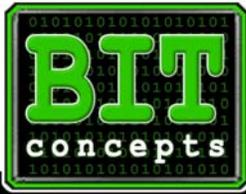
After your eyeballs recuperate from the garish color scheme, what else do you notice? There are two tacky pictures scaled down too far that it breaks up the lines in them, text that gives no information, and there are no links to information about the services they offer. While the picture above is from a fictitious web site, there are *plenty* of sites that look like this.

Notice, too, the use of frames on the page (the "Welcome to" and "We Offer" portions). Frames and framesets are generally considered bad design both aesthetically and in searchability. Google and the other Internet search engines cannot locate information in frames on a web page. So if that is where you have your club name, address, or services, chances are you will not be able to be found with a search engine.
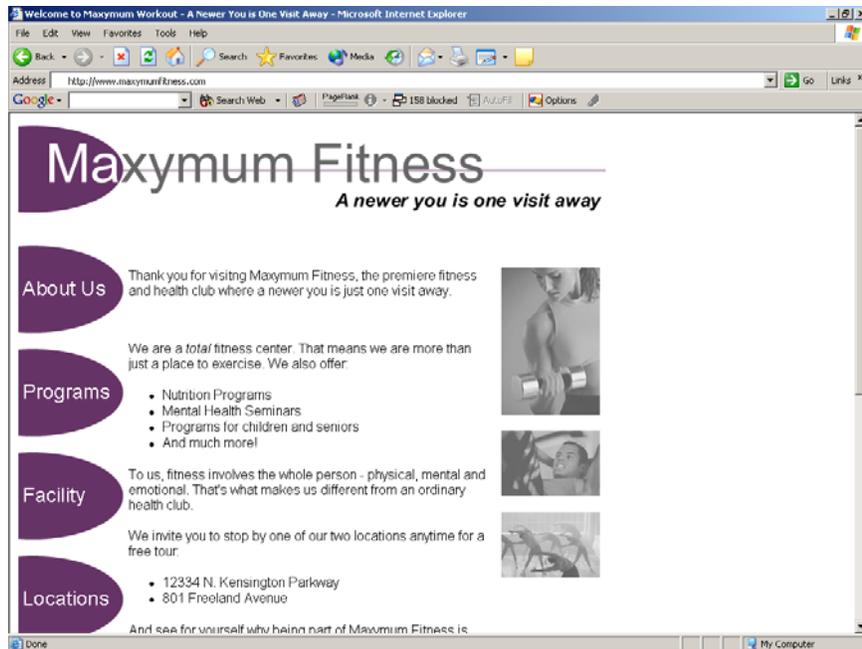
Now take a look at this one.
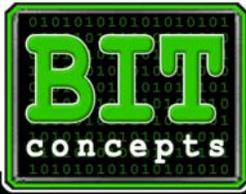
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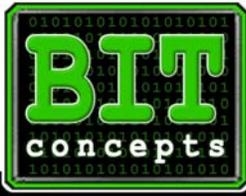Fax: 502.587.5944

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It is obviously better than the previous one. Note the cleaner layout, the presentation of information, the navigation buttons along the left margin, and the logo across the top, and the stock photos used in the right-hand margin are less tacky than the ones used in the previous example (plus, you can actually see them). By no means is this the ideal layout for a site, but it is more effective and quite a bit better-looking than the other one. What is more important, however, is that there is actual informative text in the body of the page, which will make it easier for search engines to locate and help your potential customers find you.

Think Clean, Be Clean, Be Professional

Even with an effective basic web site design, there is still the temptation to cram information on each page of the site – text, pictures, links, buttons, and more. Part of avoiding the "tin eye" syndrome is to think in terms of the effective use of space. Again, think of basic business communication. Is it easier to read a lengthy single-page business letter that has no margins, or a two-page letter that has proper margins and line spacing? Sure, the two-page letter may be longer, but it is easier to read. It is cleaner, easier on the reader's eyes, and it gets the message through more effectively.

A professional web site design team knows about proper, efficient page layout and can help you shape your own vision about how your web site should look. Remember that your web site is a reflection of your business and, in that respect, a reflection of you as a professional.

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In the past decade we have watched the World Wide Web grow from being interesting visual toy to an essential tool for doing business and communicating. In addition, we have watched web sites become more informative, graphically interesting, and useful.

Work with your web site development team to make sure your web site is, too.

Tips for a Professional Website Part3
By Dennis McDonough

Your business is all about body motion, from dozens of people in a step aerobics class, to a single individual lifting weights. Your customers hope those kinds of motions will yield some beneficial results, namely toned muscles and a better sense of well-being.

So since your business is all about motion, why not include some of it on your web site?

By now you have probably heard about streaming video for the web, and you have probably seen some of it, too. When used properly, streaming video is a highly-effective as a web site element. However, there can be lots of thorny and expensive issues to solve when setting it up on your website (for example, the video file must compressed so that your site visitors can view it properly, plus there is the cost of actually producing professional video) that may make using it a little problematic.

Fortunately, there is a cost-effective way around the expense and hassle of putting motion on your web site.

Not Just a Flash in the Pan

One extremely cost-effective way to create motion for your web site is to use movie files created by Macromedia Flash. In its early days, Flash was used strictly for creating animation of text, pictures, and other elements for web sites. Over the years, it has grown into a program that can also incorporate video.

One of the benefits of using Flash movies is that it requires no additional computer hardware to run. The only requirement is that your site visitors must have the Flash plug-in installed on their machines. It is free and available from www.macromedia.com. You will, however, need to have a notice on your web site that portions of it will require the Flash plug-in.

You can have Flash presentations of:
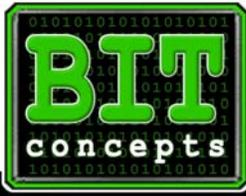
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A Virtual Tour of your Club – Put a collection of pictures of your club into an interactive presentation so that your site visitors can get a visual overview of all the equipment and services you provide.

An Exercise of the Week or Month – Have one of your instructors perform a certain exercise (for example, concentration curls) as pictures are taken of each step. Your Flash design team can run those pictures together to create an animation of the exercise. You can change this weekly or monthly.

Existing Video – If you already have a professionally-made video of your club (or of a certain class), you can have a Flash presentation that plays it. To do that you will first need to convert the video into one of two computer video formats: Apple QuickTime or Windows Media. Your web site design team can do that for you. Once the video is converted, it is imported into the Flash program, then converted into a Flash movie ready for viewing on your web site. It is cost- and time-effective in that you do not need any additional video streaming equipment. As long as your site visitor has the Flash plug-in, the video will play.

Furthermore, no matter which type of presentation you have, you have the option of letting a Flash presentation run on its own or require user interaction (e.g., click a button to move to the next part).

What's more, Flash has the capability to include some slick coding features which you can use to create such elements as target heart rate and body mass index calculators. All your visitors have to do is enter figures, click a button, and get a result. This is different from normal web-based calculators in that you can have animations that accompany it.

Your web site design team can offer you many other uses for Flash to enhance your site visitors' experiences. But like everything else we have discussed over the past few months, you should use these elements in moderation. However, with lots of planning, organization, and creativity, you can add memorable, effective motion to your web site.

Figure 1 – This is an interactive target heart rate calculator programmed in Flash. The user enters figures, clicks Calculate, then gets the target heart rate. From here, the user can view recommended exercises (which can also be animated), reset the calculator, or go to a different one.
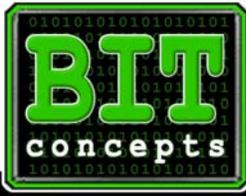
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Tips for a Professional Website Part4
By Dennis McDonough

"Moderation is a fatal thing: nothing succeeds like excess."
                    --Oscar Wilde

"Wilde didn't live long enough to see the World Wide Web."
                    --Dennis McDonough

For the past several issues we have discussed a number of issues that deal with your presence on the Internet: how to select a professional web design team, what to avoid in a design, and how to optimize your site so that customers using search engines can locate it.

Overall, we have stated that your web site is a form of business communication and needs to be treated as such, even though you can do much more in a web site than you can in a business letter or even a brochure. However, you must remember that all the elements that make up a web site – graphics, animation, text, etc. – must be used in moderation if you want to make your site accessible to your customers and keep them there. There are too many web sites that are junked up with unnecessary, slow-loading animations, graphics that are not sized correctly, text that fills a page from margin to margin, and other elements that would have made Oscar Wilde change his mind about the success of excess.

Here are several common web site elements that are sometimes used *excessively* along with suggestions on how to use them *effectively*:

Text – While good graphics may be key to a nice-looking site, basic text still provides the information you wish to communicate and, equally important, what your customers and search engines will look for. Keep in mind, though, that *too much* text on a page can work against you. A good rule of thumb is: if your user has to scroll down five times to read the text on a page, you probably have too much. Break text up and have it appear on other pages, if necessary. Better yet, just be concise with your writing so text amount won't be an issue.

Also, consider the size and color of your text. Don't cheat the five-scroll rule of thumb by making your text too small to read. Likewise, don't make it too large so that it swallows space

Figure 1. A site in violation of much of what we discuss: too much text, too many graphics, too much animation. The content is also broken into frames, which makes it harder for search engines to find it.
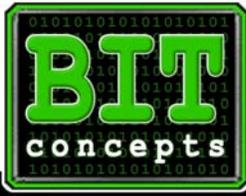
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on the page. Keep the color contrast high (e.g., black text on a white background, white text on a blue background, etc.). Remember that your web site is a form of business communication. You want what you say to be readable and understandable.

Graphics – Virtually essential to any web site, graphics can also cause a number of problems if they are not optimized for the web (i.e., resized so that they will load fast on your customer's computers). Equally important is how your graphics are positioned on your pages (are there too many, or not enough, or do they clash with the text placement, etc.). Too many graphics can make a site look busy, while not enough of them may leave too much blank space and give your site a hollow, unfinished look.

Graphics aren't limited to pictures only. There are other elements such as borders, logos, buttons, and other design pieces. But like all the other elements that go into a site design, you must not be excessive with them. Each page on your site will need to at least have navigation buttons or menus, a few optimized pictures, and your club's logo. Do not overuse graphics on your site just because they may look cool to you. If graphics get in the way of your message, your customers may just give up on your site and look elsewhere.

Animations – There was a time when little animated .gif files peppered just about every web site you visited. Back then they were a novelty. Now they tend to be annoying. To be sure, animated graphics do add some interest to a site, but only if used in moderation and within the context of your message. In other words, don't put an animation on a page just because it looks cute or cool. Remember that your customers have eyes, too, and that one person's cool web-gizmo is another person's annoyance.

Consider, too, that animations need to be optimized just like graphics. They need to be sized so that they do not take too long to load. Your customers can get quickly annoyed if you have a bunch of slow-loading animations on a page, and if they are loading before anything else on a page appears, they will not stick around to see the information they were trying to find.
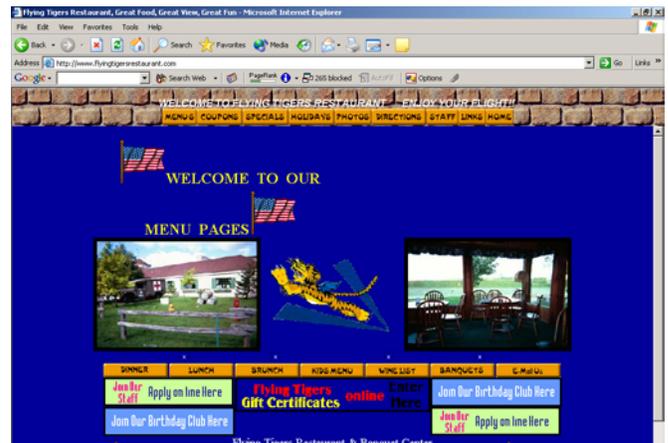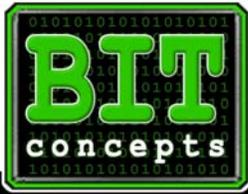

Figure 2. This site is peppered with the flapping America flag animations. Since there are so many on every page, it takes awhile for them to load. Showing patriotism is a fine thing. Gunking up a business web site with animations is just plain excessive.

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While your web site design team knows what elements will enhance your site and provide a design that will be aesthetically pleasing and effective, you should keep in mind that not every cool gizmo or color scheme you see on a web site will work on yours. Use all your web site elements in moderation. Your visitors' eyes will thank you.

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