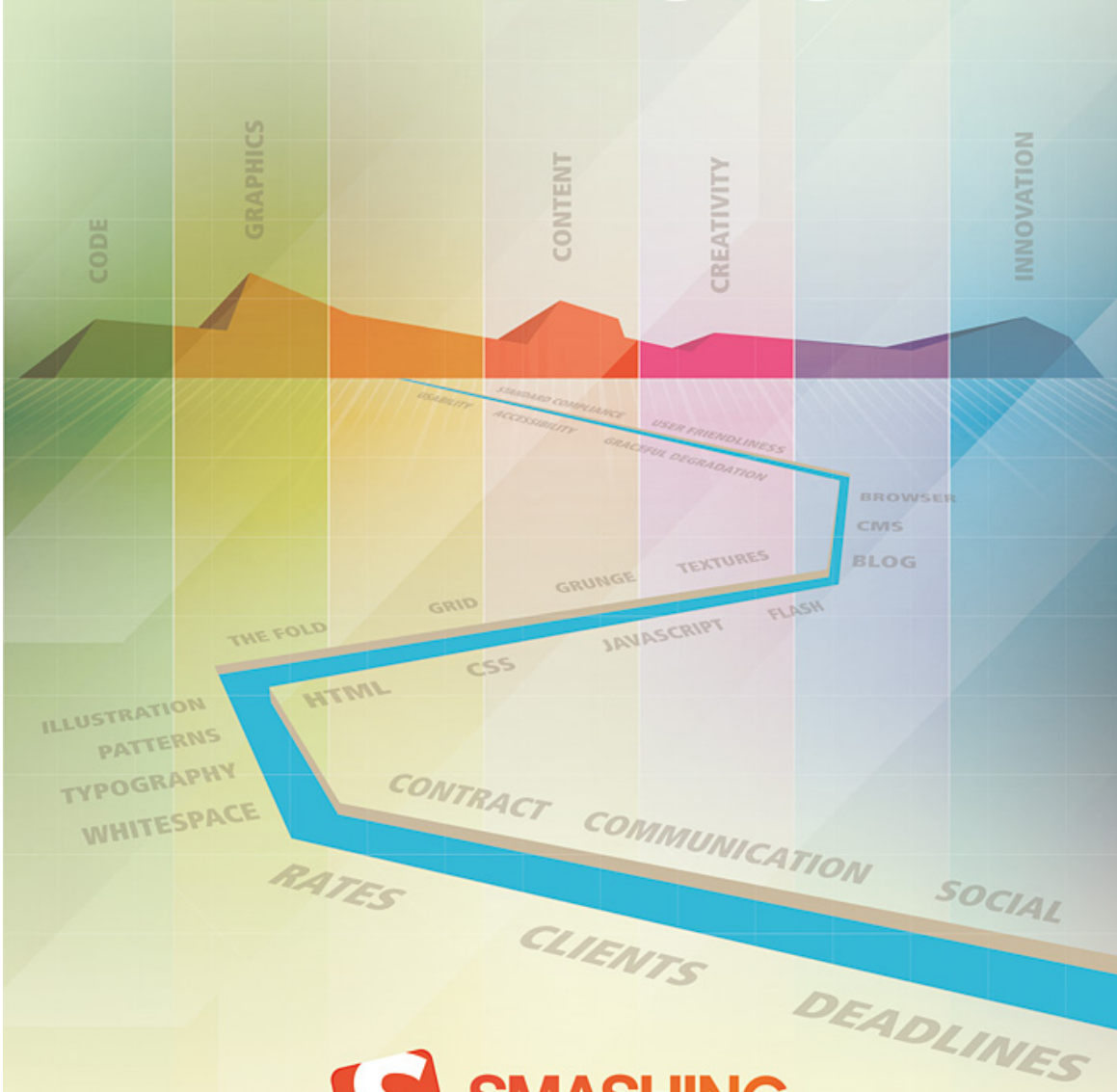


01. PROFESSIONAL WEB DESIGN



Preface

This e-book contains a selection of the best articles about professional Web design that have been published on Smashing Magazine in 2009 and 2010. The articles have been carefully edited and prepared for this PDF version; some screenshots and links were removed to make the book easier to read and print out.

This book presents guidelines for professional Web development, including communicating with clients, creating a road map to a successful portfolio, rules for professional networking and tips on designing user interfaces for business Web applications. The book shares expert advice for students and young Web designers, and it also helps you learn how to respond effectively to design criticism, use storytelling for a better user experience and apply color theory to your professional designs.

This book is not protected by DRM. A copy costs only \$9.90 and is available exclusively at <http://shop.smashingmagazine.com>. Please respect our work and the hard efforts of our writers. If you received this book from a source other than the Smashing Shop, please support us by purchasing your copy in our online store. Thank you.

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Harsh Truths About Corporate Websites

By Paul Boag

We all make mistakes running our websites. However, the nature of those mistakes varies depending on the size of your company. As your organization grows, the mistakes change. This article addresses common mistakes made by large organizations.

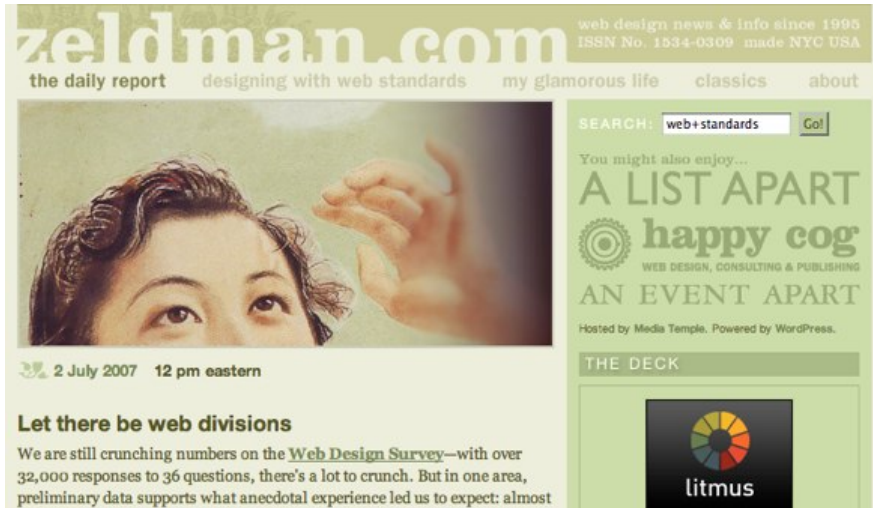
Most of the clients I work with are large organizations: universities, large charities, public sector institutions and big companies. Over the last seven years, I have noticed certain recurring misconceptions among these organizations. This article aims to dispel these illusions and encourage people to face the harsh reality.

The problem is that if you are reading this, you are probably already aware of these things. But hopefully this article will be helpful to you as you convince others within your organization. In any case, here are some of the harsh truths about websites of large organizations.

You Need A Separate Web Division

In many organizations, the website is managed by either the marketing or IT department. However, this inevitably leads to a turf war, with the website becoming the victim of internal politics.

In reality, pursuing a Web strategy is not particularly suited to either group. IT may be excellent at rolling out complex systems, but it is not suited to developing a friendly user experience or establishing an online brand.



Jeffrey Zeldman urges organizations to create a separate Web division.

Marketing, on the other hand, is little better. As Jeffrey Zeldman puts it in his article [Let There Be Web Divisions](#):

The Web is a conversation. Marketing, by contrast, is a monologue... And then there's all that messy business with semantic markup, CSS, unobtrusive scripting, card-sorting exercises, HTML run-throughs, involving

users in accessibility, and the rest of the skills and experience that don't fall under Marketing's purview.

Instead, the website should be managed by a single unified team. Again, Zeldman sums it up when he writes:

Put them in a division that recognizes that your website is not a bastard of your brochures, nor a natural outgrowth of your group calendar. Let there be Web divisions.

Managing Your Website Is A Full-Time Job

Not only is the website often split between marketing and IT, it is also usually under-resourced. Instead of there being a dedicated Web team, those responsible for the website are often expected to run it alongside their "day job." When a Web team *is* in place, it is often over-stretched. The vast majority of its time is spent on day-to-day maintenance rather than on longer-term strategic thinking.

This situation is further aggravated by the fact that the people hired to "maintain" the website are junior members of the staff. They do not have the experience or authority to push the website forward. It is time for organizations to seriously invest in their websites and finally

move their Web strategies forward by hiring full-time senior Web managers.

Periodic Redesign Is Not Enough

Because corporate websites are under-resourced, they are often neglected for long periods of time. They slowly become out of date in their content, design and technology. Eventually, the website becomes such an embarrassment that management steps in and demands that it be sorted. This inevitably leads to a complete redesign at considerable expense. This is a flawed approach. It is a waste of money, because when the old website is replaced, the investment that was put into it is lost, too. It is also tough on finances, with a large expenditure having to be made every few years.

The screenshot shows a web page layout. On the left is a vertical sidebar with a logo that says 'A LIST apart FOR PEOPLE WHO MAKE WEBSITES' and a badge 'No. 206'. The main content area has a navigation bar with links: 'ARTICLES • TOPICS • ABOUT • CONTACT • CONTRIBUTE • FEED'. Below this is the date 'OCTOBER 24, 2005' and the article title 'Good Designers Redesign, Great Designers Realign' by 'CAMERON MOLL'. A sub-header reads 'Published in: Brand Arts, Graphic Design | Discuss this article »'. The main text begins with 'Halfway through 2004, I openly predicted incessant redesigning would become somewhat cessant by the same year's end:'. A quote follows: 'Forward thinkers understand content is still king and focus on such while deploying minimal upgrades, rather than relying on skillful makeovers that gain short-lived traffic spurts following award listings but offer downright weak content.' Below the quote is the text 'How wrong I was. Apparently the Incessant Redesign is far from extinction.' To the right of the text is a watercolor illustration of a bear. On the far right is a sidebar with a search box labeled 'Search ALA', a 'Topics' section with links for Code, Content, Culture, Design, Process, and User Science, and a 'Snapshot' section with introductory text.

Cameron Moll encourages Web designers to realign, not redesign.

A better way is continual investment in your website, allowing it to evolve over time. Not only is this less wasteful, it is also better for users, as pointed out by Cameron Moll in his post [Good Designers Redesign, Great Designers Realign](#).

Your Website Cannot Appeal To Everyone

One of the first questions I ask a client is, "Who is your target audience?" I am regularly shocked at the length of the reply. Too often, it includes a long and detailed list of diverse people. Inevitably, my next question is, "Which of those many demographic groups are most important?" Depressingly, the answer is usually that they are all equally important.

The harsh truth is that if you build a website for everyone, it will appeal to no one. It is important to be extremely focused about your audience and cater your design and content to it. Does this mean you should ignore your other users? Not at all. Your website should be accessible by all and not offend or exclude anybody. However, the website does need to be primarily aimed at a clearly defined audience.

You Are Wasting Money On Social Networking

I find it encouraging that website managers increasingly recognize that a Web strategy involves more than running a website. They are beginning to use tools such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to

increase their reach and engage with new audiences. However, although they are using these tools, too often they do so ineffectively. Tweeting on a corporate account or posting sales demonstrations on YouTube misses the essence of social networking.



Microsoft dramatically improved its image among the development community by allowing staff to speak out via the Channel 9 website.

Social networking is about people engaging with people. Individuals do not want to build relationships with brands and corporations. They want to talk to other people. Too many organizations throw millions into Facebook apps and viral videos when they could spend that money on engaging with people in a transparent and open way.

Instead of creating a corporate Twitter account or indeed even a corporate blog, encourage your employees to start tweeting and blogging themselves. Provide guidelines on acceptable behavior and what tools they need to start engaging directly with the community that is connected to your products and services. This demonstrates your commitment not only to the community but also to the human side of your business.

Your Website Is Not All About You

While some website managers want their website to appeal to everyone, others want it to appeal to themselves and their colleagues. A surprising number of organizations ignore their users entirely and base their websites entirely on an organizational perspective. This typically manifests itself in inappropriate design that caters to the managing director's personal preferences and in content that is full of jargon.

A website should not pander to the preferences of staff but should rather meet the needs of its users. Too many designs are rejected because the boss "doesn't like green." Likewise, too much website copy contains acronyms and terms used only within the organization.

You're Not Getting Value From Your Web Team

Whether they have an in-house Web team or use an external agency, many organizations fail to get the most from their Web designers.

Web designers are much more than pixel pushers. They have a wealth of knowledge about the Web and how users interact with it. They also understand design techniques, including grid systems, white space, color theory and much more.



Treating designers as pixel pushers wastes their experience: here, a designer laments his predicament on Twitter.

It is therefore wasteful to micro-manage by asking them to “make the logo bigger” or to “move that element three pixels to the left.” By doing so, you are reducing their role to that of a software operator and are wasting the wealth of experience they bring.

If you want to get the maximum return on your Web team, present it with problems, not solutions. For example, if you're targeting your website at teenage girls, and the designer goes for corporate blue, suggest that your audience might not respond well to that color. Do not tell him or her to change it to pink. This way, the designer has the freedom to find a solution that may be even better than your choice. You're allowing your designer to solve the problem you have presented.

Design By Committee Brings Death

The ultimate symbol of a large organization's approach to website management is the committee. A committee is often formed to tackle the website because internal politics demand that everyone have a say and that all considerations be taken into account.

To say that all committees are a bad idea is naive, and to suggest that a large corporate website could be developed without consultation is fanciful. But when it comes to design, committees are often the kiss of death.



Design by committee leads to design on the fly.

Design is subjective. The way we respond to a design is influenced by culture, gender, age, childhood experience and even physical conditions (such as color blindness). What one person considers great design could be hated by another. This is why it is so important that design decisions be informed by user testing rather than personal experience. Unfortunately, this approach is rarely taken when a committee is making the decisions.

Instead, designing by committee becomes about compromise. Because committee members have different opinions about the design, they look for common ground. One person hates the blue

color scheme, while another loves it. This leads to designing on the fly, with the committee instructing the designer to “try a different blue” in the hopes of finding middle ground. Unfortunately, this leads only to bland design that neither appeals to nor excites anyone.

A CMS Is Not A Silver Bullet

Many of the clients I work with have amazingly unrealistic expectations of content management systems (CMS). Those without one think it will solve all of their content woes, and those who have one moan because it hasn't!

It is certainly true that a CMS can bring a lot of benefits. These include:

- reducing the technical barriers of adding content,
- allowing more people to add and edit content,
- facilitating faster updates,
- and allowing greater control.

But many CMS' are less flexible than their owners would like. They fail to meet the changing demands of the websites they are a platform for. Website managers also complain that their CMS is hard to use. In many cases, this is because the ones using it have not been adequately trained or are not using it regularly enough.

Finally, a CMS may allow content to be easily updated, but it does not ensure that content *will* be updated or even that the quality of content will be acceptable. Many CMS-based websites still have out-of-date content or poorly written copy. This is because internal processes have not been put in place to support the content contributors.

If you look to a CMS to solve your website maintenance issues, you will be disappointed.

You Have Too Much Content

Part of the problem with maintaining content on large corporate websites is that there is too much content in the first place. Most of these websites have “evolved” over years, with more and more content being added. At no point did anyone review the content and ask what could be taken away.

Many website managers fill their website with copy that nobody will read. This happens because of one or more of the following:

- A fear of missing something: by putting everything online, they believe users will be able to find whatever they want. Unfortunately, with so much information available, it is hard to find anything.
- A fear users will not understand: whether from a lack of confidence in their website or in their audience, they feel the

need to provide endless instruction to users. Unfortunately, users never read this copy.

- A desperate desire to convince: they are desperate to sell their product or communicate their message, and so they bloat the text with sales copy that actually conveys little valuable information.

Steve Krug, in his book *Don't Make Me Think*, encourages website managers to "get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half of what's left." This will reduce the noise level on each page and make the useful content more prominent.

Conclusions

Large organizations do a lot right in running their websites. However, they also face some unique challenges that can lead to painful mistakes. Resolving these problems means accepting that mistakes have been made, overcoming internal politics and changing the way they control their brand. Doing this will give you a significant competitive advantage and make your Web strategy more effective over the long term.

Paul Boag is the founder of UK Web design agency Headscape, author of the Website Owner's Manual and host of award-winning Web design podcast Boagworld.