

Website Design

According to internet retailing experts, 50% of shoppers purchasing design is related to website design. No matter your product or service offering or price, website design is a major success factor. A poor design can turn away customers at any point in the sales process. Plus, if your search engine link doesn't "connect" with the potential consumer you'll lose those visitors as well. Not to mention waist your SEM budget.

Because keeping on top of website design features is so important, most major retailers update their site every two years, according to P. Lucas. This keeps the site fresh and able to meet consumer's demands. A site that has intuitive navigation is a key element to not losing shoppers.

Meeting consumer expectations and preferences for shopping over the Internet means more than creating a site with the "wow!" factor (apologies to Microsoft!). It means designing sites that deliver richer, more detailed graphic capabilities, customer friendly navigation and lightning fast downloads. These expectations have been instilled in consumers by the expansion of broadband connectivity and consumers' increasing comfort with shopping online.

Site design experts agree that any successful site design or redesign must deliver ease of navigation, cater to the shopping preferences of the retailer's customers and show brand consistency. Ignoring these three basic rules can result in a site design that is dated, cluttered, unappealing, and delivers lower sales.

Making it easier to find the desired products delivers higher sales, but today's shoppers are more image-oriented than in the past. That means delivering richer graphics, larger type, and product descriptions that shoppers can read at a glance. Bulleted product descriptions are a feature several Internet retailers have either adopted or are considering including in their site redesign, according to site design experts.

How to access additional product information is a hot topic of debate among web designers and Internet retailers. At issue is whether it is best to have consumers scroll down the page to access additional information such as product guides or care instructions or to have them click on a link that activates a pop-up window with the desired data or takes them to another page.

Currently, there is no hard and fast rule as to which approach is more effective. What web site designers do agree on is that pertinent product information needs to be kept above the page fold and as easy to read as possible.

Broadband is dramatically raising consumer expectations for web site design, according to site designers. In July, more than 59% of U.S. households with Internet access had a broadband connection, up from 51% a year earlier, according to Nielsen Net Ratings. In addition, a large portion of Internet users in the 41% of households with low-band connections have broadband access through work

Thanks to the steady growth in the number of Internet users with broadband access, applications such as Flash and servers capable of presenting high-resolution, three-dimensional and multi-view images of products are fast becoming standard fare in site design. Flash, which allows designers to incorporate animation, video, and enriched colors, is being used not only throughout web site design, but also applied in the shopping cart. The aim is to create a more engaging shopping cart complete with high-resolution images of the product placed in the cart and links back to the page detailing the product, in case the customer wants to review the item, and which downloads information faster. Information downloads that take more than 10 seconds can create a sense of tedium and lead to abandonment.

Still, designers must be careful not to overwhelm customers with slick media presentations, as they can result in clutter and turn off some customers. Customers want the option not to view Flash-based presentations; if for no other reason than they may be in hurry and do not want to sit through it. They also expect any graphical enhancements to be seamless and not interfere with the shopping experience. Given the complexities of web site design, retailers are certain to test several variations of the site while in the design stage and even after the new design is up and running. It is not surprising then that many design experts see the process as evolutionary, rather than as a project that can be left idling in neutral for 12 or more months once it is completed.

