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What Constitutes Good and Bad Web Design?

By ALICE RAWSTHORN JAN. 6, 2013

LONDON — It sounded so simple. I wanted to know what exhibitions will be shown at Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris this year, and consulted its Web site. Could I find the information there? No. I tried searching in English, then in French, and scoured every section of the site, even the least likely ones. Perhaps I could have pieced together the details eventually, but I wasn't sure how.

A similar thing happened when I logged on to Tate's redesigned site hoping to book tickets for a film screening at Tate Modern. Trawling through the site to find that particular screening turned out to be unexpectedly complicated. Nor are Tate and Centre Pompidou the only offenders. Just think of how often you feel irritated or flummoxed by an inexplicably confusing Web site.

Shoddy Web site design is a curse of modern life. The more dependent we have become on the Internet for information, the likelier we are to suffer from its design deficiencies. Bad design can be infuriating, inconvenient or damaging in any field. But it is especially frustrating in areas like this where many of us find the technology so inscrutable that we tend to blame ourselves for being baffled, because we feel unable to judge whether the design is at fault. So what does constitute good and bad Web site design?

In principle, a well-designed Web site needs to deliver the same things as most other examples of good design by fulfilling its intended function efficiently and engagingly. On the efficiency front, given that the most important purpose of most

Web sites is to enable us to access information, helping us to find it effortlessly is essential. Straightforward though this sounds, dispiritingly few sites manage to achieve it. A common mistake is to prioritize style over substance. Fashion and luxury brands often do so by using animation software, which produces luscious visual images that can take ages to upload. Louis Vuitton's site is a particularly irksome example.

Other sites fall prey to what we could call "technologyitis." Their designers insist on using sophisticated technologies, which look dazzling when they show the sites to clients on their state-of-the-art computers, but considerably less so on older, cheaper machines with slower Internet connections, or on the cramped screens of phones.

But the principal problem with many Web sites is that their designers were neither rigorous nor imaginative enough in planning the way we will navigate them. Ideally, they should anticipate all of the individual items of information that we will wish to find, and how we might choose to combine them. They must then organize the site so that the requisite data is delivered promptly. If you find information swiftly and easily on a Web site, its designer has succeeded. But if you need to click on an inordinate number of buttons and links, or dither over what to do next, the designer has failed. Amazon's site scores highly for navigational efficiency, but poorly in terms of the second criterion of good Web design, because it is far from engaging.

One site that combines both qualities belongs to the London restaurant Quo Vadis. The home page looks like the front page of an old-fashioned newspaper, and you simply click on the relevant section, like "Today's Menus" or "Reservations," to retrieve the information. The charm of the site, which was developed by the Web design group Thumbcrumble and the graphic designers Irving & Co., is that it shares the witty illustrative style of Quo Vadis's menus, bills and the other elements of the visual identity it has adopted since the Scottish chef Jeremy Lee took over a year ago.

All of the illustrations are by John Broadley, who has, as Mr. Lee put it, "an amazing sense of humor and a wonderfully dark streak." He began by illustrating Quo Vadis's menus in a cartoonish style of black and white figurative sketches depicting different aspects of the restaurant and the pleasures of eating. Dozens

more drawings have since been made for the Web site, including illustrations of Quo Vadis, harvest rituals and decadent feasts.

Beguiling though Quo Vadis's site is, it contains relatively little data and has a limited number of clearly defined functions. The more information a site has to hold, the more challenging its design will be, especially if that data is complex in nature and time-sensitive: All of which makes the new Web site of the Milwaukee Police Department particularly impressive.

Designed by the communications group Cramer-Krasselt and the Web design consultancy LISS Interactive, the site condenses a labyrinth of archived information and breaking news about the M.P.D. into five sections. "The Source" is a live news feed on local police work, and "The Stats" features striking visualizations of crime statistics, like the murder rate and number of guns seized. "Most Wanted" is an interactive version of the traditional posters filled with mug shots of police suspects. "The Heroes" illustrates the impact of the M.P.D.'s work on Milwaukee, and "About" relays practical information like how to pay parking fines and file incident reports.

Stylistically, the site combines the crisp, no-nonsense typeface Helvetica with color photographs of the M.P.D. at work. As well as being an easily accessible source of useful information for local people, it presents a dynamic, yet realistic depiction of their police department in action.

As I began by grumbling about museum sites, it seems only fair to end by praising a promising one: the new Web site of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, which is to reopen in April after 10 years of renovation.

Juxtaposing images of the building and of masterpieces from the museum's collection with the spruce typography of its new visual identity developed by the Dutch designer Irma Boom, the site looks stunning. It is also organized so thoughtfully that it is remarkably easy to navigate. Let's hope it stays that way as more information is loaded in the approach to the reopening.

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