

Sign shop Web design 101

What you should—and shouldn't—be doing on the net

By Dan Antonelli, President and Creative Director, Graphic D-Signs, Inc. and SignShopMarketing.com

For most sign companies, the Web remains an untapped marketing resource. They have no Web presence. Of those who have a Web site, many are disappointed with the results, or unhappy with the design and what it says about their company. Some shop owners have tried to build their own sites, often with limited success.

So why do most sign shop Web sites fail to deliver on the powerful marketing opportunity

that the Net offers? Here's a rundown on some common pitfalls, and how you can avoid them.

1. Designing your own site Sure, you're creative, and you're great on the computer. Why not design your own Web site? You bought Microsoft's Frontpage® or maybe even Adobe Macromedia Dreamweaver®. This Web stuff looks pretty easy.

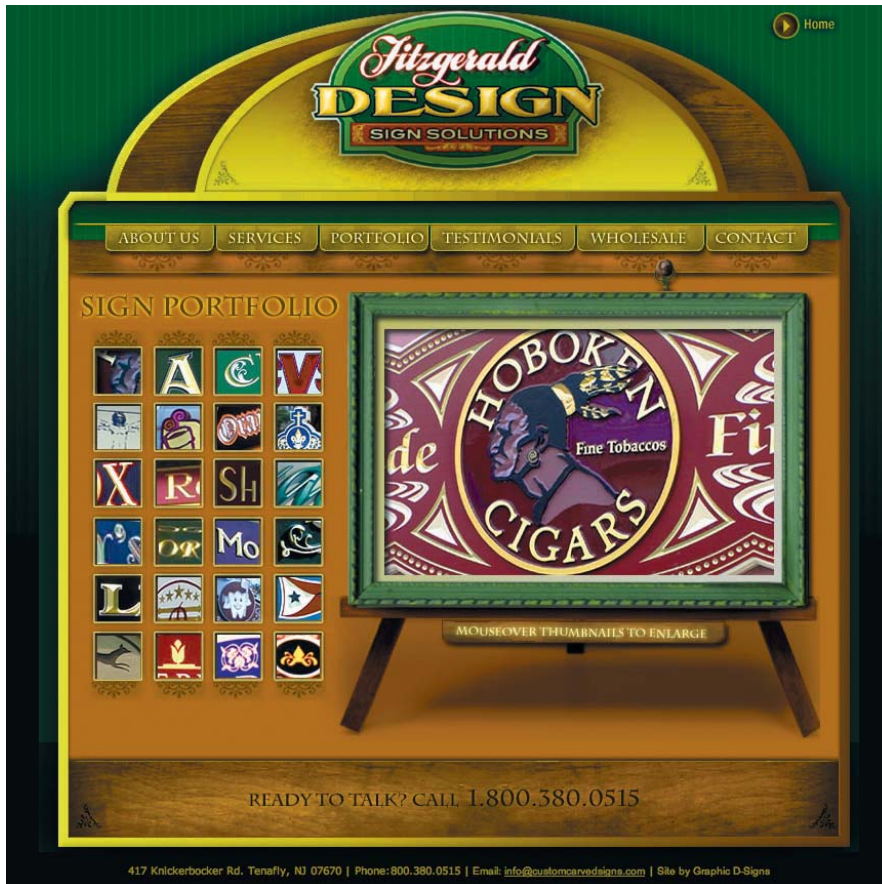
Remember those customers who come to your shop and decide that making an effective sign is simply a matter of hitting a few buttons on the computer? Clearly, it's much more than that. We've designed over 200 Web sites here—and we're still learning the nuances necessary to build cohesive and functionally sophisticated Web sites.

Of the many sites we've seen that were designed by the shop owner, most lack professionalism and speaks poorly about the shop. As a business that's selling the importance of a professional image, it's ironic that most sign companies overlook this and present an image that is often amateurish—in our own signs, trucks and Web sites.

Designing your own site is probably a poor use of your resources, too. The learning curve is steep. You could probably make thousands of dollars worth of signs in the time you spend learning how to make your site—and the end result still might not be as good as hiring a professional.

2. Hiring your (nephew, friend, kid out of college, guy who's good on computers) to design your site Perhaps you've already decided that designing your own Web site is a bad idea. You're going to pay someone to do it. What about that college kid you know who is taking Web design classes? He's going to be cheap!

The theory of this sounds great—get a Web site built for much less than a professional would charge. But you've heard this one



A better way to view photos of your work Simply place your mouse over the smaller thumbnail image and the large image appears in the picture frame. This example is from www.customcarvedesigns.com.

before from the client who provides the artwork to you, because “you charge too much to design the sign.”

If you go this route, you may get a functional Web site, but it may fail to deliver the strategic marketing objectives of your business. Perhaps there’s no search engine optimization (SEO) included. It’s doubtful they understand your business, how it works, and what you’re trying to communicate.

“We paid my friend’s son, who’s in college, about \$500 to design our first Web site, (www.arizonadesignsinc.com)” says Jeffrey Chudoff of Arizona Designs, Inc. “Then we realized it didn’t reflect who we were or the image we wanted to present to prospective clients.”

As with everything, you tend to get what you pay for. You get a better value by paying to do it right the first time.

3. Failure to develop a marketing plan for the site

Some people complain that their Web site isn’t generating leads or sales. Building a site and marketing a site are two different and important elements. You can’t expect that once the site is up, Google is going to suddenly make you number one for “signs New Jersey”. Your designer should advise you on a marketing program designed to generate traffic to your site. This is a separate component, and might consist of a paid placement strategy with the major search engines (see *Marketing your site makes sure it delivers results on page 4??*).

“We moved most of our advertising budget to a paid placement strategy, focusing on a 150-mile radius of our shop,” says Jack Custeau of www.customautowrap.com. “Our site continues to generate leads and sales, and has been one of the best marketing investments we’ve made.”

4. Failure of the site to address the needs of search engines and sites that use Macromedia Flash® excessively

Most sites that I see fail to take into consideration the importance of the search engines, and how they rank Web sites. Search engines rank sites on a number of different criteria, such as page titles, keyword density on home page, embedded meta content and alt attributes (see *Anatomy of a successful sign shop Web site design* at right). It’s the job of the Web designer to design a site that takes into account these criteria when building your site, otherwise the site has very little chance of showing up on the search engines.

Sites built entirely in Flash are especially poor for delivering search engine results. The

Anatomy of a successful sign shop Web site design



Page title: The page title contains relevant keywords and phrases that will help with the search engine ranking.

Easy navigation: We kept this as simple as possible. Who we are, what we do, examples of what we do, our clients, what they say about us, and how to reach us.

Flash element: We wanted to use Flash to create some visual excitement on this site while being able to highlight six of their top jobs. Using the sky then, we added movement and interest to the home page to capture the viewer’s attention. In this instance, we also made the buttons in Flash.

Pathways: It’s important for viewers to have a clear sense of direction from the home page. What are we trying to highlight, and what do we want them to see must be obvious. Here, we gave the viewer the options of reading about the company, viewing the gallery, reading some testimonials, and also getting directions to the shop.

Keyword density: It’s important to place as many keywords in HTML (not graphics, which can’t be read by search engines) on the home page. Here we placed terms within the copy that we think people would use to find a company like this.

Address and contact info: This information appears on every page throughout the site. You don’t want visitors to work to find out how to contact the shop.

Page width: Sites still need to be designed for 800 pixels wide, although you want to make sure the site looks pleasing on larger monitors. We use sophisticated background fills to insure the site looks good on larger monitors with higher resolution settings. We don’t advocate non-fixed width sites, mainly because we like to have complete control over the browsing experience regardless of screen size.

better option is to build a site that is based in HTML and combines the use of Flash.

These are all issues that should be discussed with your Web designer up front. This question needs to be asked “How will you design our site to address the needs



Here are a few sign company Web sites that we've done that illustrate good design and SEO strategy:

- www.customcarvedsigns.com
- www.customautowrap.com
- www.berkeleysigns.com
- www.cre8one.com

- www.modern-d-signs.com
- www.richdesignsinc.com
- www.strongsigns.com
- www.whisperpinestudio.com

Marketing your site makes sure it delivers results

Paid search engine placement: A paid strategy might entail paying to have your site listed at the top of the list for various search terms, under the "Sponsored Links" category. This may require you to set a budget for the month where you are charged per-click when someone goes to your site from the search engine. It's very effective, but can get expensive. It lets you target specific regions though, which can help you manage the cost.

Your answering machine: If no one is there to answer your phone, make sure that prospective customers can at least get additional information on the Web. Make sure your outgoing message directs the caller to visit you online for more information.

Stationery: Everything that goes out of your shop should include your Web site address—billheads, business cards, letterheads, faxes, envelopes, ads, etc.

Vehicle: Make sure your shop truck has your Web site on it legibly. People are more likely to remember a Web address than a phone number. Having it on the back of the vehicle is especially important.

of the search engine?" If they can't answer that, it's not a good sign.

5. Poor navigational structure An effective Web site must have a logical flow and hierarchy. There are certain things viewers expect to see. Your site isn't the place to try cute ways to make people navigate a Web site. It should be as succinct as possible, and present the information in a cohesive, logical manner. It should be easy for people to contact you. (And that contact information should be on every page).

6. Sloppy, unprofessional copywriting Contrary to the common myth that "no one reads anything—they just look at the pictures"—make sure the wording on the site is polished and professional. (What does a misspelling on a sign shop's site say to the prospective customer?)

The text should speak on the level of your target audience. While you may know "a monument sign with v-carved MultiCam routed letter, gilded on 2-in. HDU, with an outline and drop shadow," don't assume your audience does. To them, it's just a pretty sign.

Ask your designer if they work with a copywriter or have one on staff who can interview you and write the copy for the site. Even if you write the bulk of it, you'll want to make sure an editor reviews it first.

7. An archaic method for viewing photos Years ago, one big issue when building a sign company Web site was the manner in which the photos were loaded and viewed. Load times were more critical than they are today. The vast majority of businesses now have high-speed Internet access. Since they are your target audience, Web designers are free to design easier and more efficient ways for your photos to be viewed.

Since 2003, we have designed photo galleries using a *disjointed photo* method (see *A better way to view photos of your work* on page 2??). We have found that this is the simplest and most efficient way for someone to quickly view a lot of photos. It eliminates pop-up windows, or annoying "before and next" type navigation. The view simply stays on one page. Placing the mouse over smaller thumbs displays the larger photo. There's nothing to click and no browser "back" buttons.

8. Using Web site templates Using Web site templates offers the advantage of a lower cost entry onto the Web. You can pick from existing sites and through a Web interface,

simply drop your information into the pre-packaged site. You can also add and delete photos on your own without needing to ask your Web designer.

But the question remains whether a template-based Web design can adequately reflect your company and your corporate identity. When building a business based solely on the importance of branding and image, what does it say about your company, if you're site looks like a template?

Our philosophy of Web design runs contrary to what template sites offer. We believe no two companies are alike, and that each site needs to be built according to that company's specific marketing goals and corporate identity.

9. A poor Web hosting plan and inadequate stats

Consider the importance of the Web hosting plan offered by your designer. One feature that is often overlooked is how the Web hosting provides stats for your web traffic. Analyzing your hits, page views and other information tells you where people go on your site, and how long they stay.

For example, if your average visitor spends only 30 seconds on your site, then maybe it's not working properly. It's also helpful to know where your traffic is originating (i.e. search engines, other Web sites, etc).

Do your homework when choosing a firm to undertake your Web design

Make sure whomever you hire to build your site understands your company and the message you are trying to communicate. Make sure you find appealing designs in their portfolio. Otherwise, don't be surprised if you're not happy with the design they come up with for your business. Ask them about their experience, the methods they use and their depth of knowledge in marketing a site as well as building a site.

Call the people they give you as references and make sure they had a good experience with the designer. This is a big decision, and making the wrong choice will prove to be a costly error. Do your homework. It will pay off. •\$€



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