

SYBEX Sample Chapter

Web Pages That Suck

Chapter 2: Site Design and Navigation

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CHAPTER

2



Site Design and Navigation

IN THIS CHAPTER

you'll build upon some of the "big picture" issues covered in the last chapter. Here, you'll look at two of the nitty-gritty issues facing a designer when creating an overall design for a Web site:

- **Designing a home page that acts as an effective site guide**
- **Designing a site that's easy to navigate**

To learn about these design issues, you'll hear about some navigational tools; then you'll look at some sites that suck and some that don't. From there, we'll move on to organizing your own site by creating storyboards. By the time you're through, you'll be able to tell a poorly designed site from an exceptionally well-designed one.

Okay, now that you know where I'm going in this chapter (a principal of good design), let's start navigating our way through this chapter by taking a look at the home page for Cigar Aficionado Magazine, shown in Figure 2.1.

To really understand what's good about this page and why it's an effective site design, I need to first talk about the concept of the home, main topic, and subsidiary pages, and the importance of making your site easy to navigate. Figure 2.2 shows how the pages on a Web site should be organized. The organization is quite simply a hierarchy with the most important page (the home page) on top and subsidiary pages below.



FIGURE 2.1 Cigar Aficionado magazine
(<http://www.cigaraficionado.com/>)



Why Does This Page **Suck**?

It doesn't! The bad boys of Web design just threw you a curve ball.

You can learn a lot about site design by looking at Cigar Aficionado's site, which you'll do later in the chapter. To start off though, here are some of the tips you can pick up from this site:

1. The designer did not sit down and start coding first thing. The designer sat down and figured out what important elements should go on the home page; then they figured out what went on the main topic pages and each subsidiary page. In other words, they scoped out the "big picture."
2. The designer put the most important elements on the first screen of the home page and the other main subsidiary pages.
3. The designer created significant content—a topic covered in Chapter 3.
4. The designer has a sense of aesthetics—the graphics and layout are first rate. No cheap clip art was used, and the *single*—repeat *single*—animated GIF (the animated cigar) is very high quality.
5. Most important, the designer created a home page that presents a professional image to the world. As soon as you go to the page, you know exactly what to expect and you know how to find the information you want.



FIGURE 2.2 Organization of a Web site

The Web pages on a site are broken down into three main groupings:

1. Home page
2. Main topic pages
3. Subsidiary pages

This organizational structure, which is simplified to its lowest elements, forms the foundation of a Web site. However, the most important navigational tool in the developer's arsenal is the home page because it is, generally, the first page seen by your visitors.

THE HOME PAGE AS A SITE GUIDE

Quite simply, the home page (or, as it's also referred to, the *front page*) is the gateway to your site. It's the road map, the index, the table of contents that tells visitors where to find the important information they need to make their stay at your site enjoyable and profitable.

A good analogy is that the home page of a Web site is similar to the cover of a newsstand magazine. You may not be aware of this fact, but the return rates

to the magazine publisher for newsstand magazines are quite high. Unlike a magazine subscription, which is purchased long in advance, a newsstand magazine has a limited period of time to entice the general public to buy it off the rack. The most important factors that influence sales are the cover and the subject matter. The same is true for your Web site.

The home page is the most important page on your site because it's generally a visitor's first impression of your company or organization. If your home page looks professional, ethical, artistic, appears to have interesting content, and doesn't have any elements that would chase a customer away, then there's a good chance your visitors will stay. Hopefully, they'll purchase something from you. If your home page fails to entice because the images are too large, you're using sound files for no reason, the page takes forever to

download, there's offensive material, the text can't be read, and so on, and so on—then your visitors will hit the Back button faster than a politician changes position on the issues.

There are three things a home page should convey to the visitor:

1. The site's purpose—the who, what, when, where, and why
2. What kind of content is contained in the site
3. How to find that content

The Main Topic Page

This is a page that the home page links to. For example, Figure 2.3 shows the home page for Lotus Development Corporation (<http://www.lotus.com/>).

From this home page, you can link to the following main topic pages:

Downloads	Purchasing	Services
Support	Developers	Corporate
Events	Discussions	Solutions
Products	Partners	Media Catalog

This is a good home page because it is clear where to go from here.

The Subsidiary Page

Any page other than a home or main topic page is a subsidiary page. Generally, these pages are subsets of a main topic page. For example, a page on the Lotusphere 98 trade show (see Figure 2.4) is a subsidiary page to the Partners main topic page.

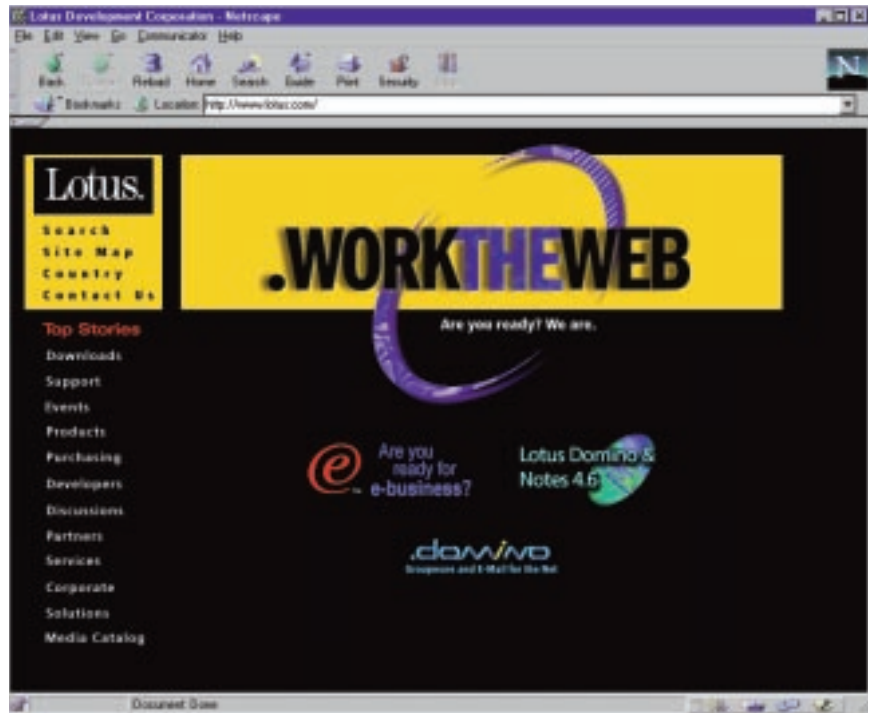


FIGURE 2.3

The Lotus home page
(<http://www.lotus.com/>)

From any subsidiary page, you want your visitors to be able to go to the home page so they can find out about your company and its products. You also want them to be able to go to any of the other main topic pages—especially a page where they can buy your products. Remember, you *always* need to make it easy for them to order.

For that reason, all your pages—home, main topic, and subsidiary pages—need to have links to the main topic pages on your site. In addition, you must include a link to the home page on all your main topic and subsidiary pages. Why?

Because you never know how a visitor arrives at your site.



FIGURE 2.4 The Lotusphere 98 trade show page is a subsidiary page.

Why is the first screen people see at a Web site sometimes a page other than the home page? Simple. Links on other pages, articles in magazines, a friend's suggestion or, most commonly, search engines. For example, a visitor might have conducted a search for the phrase **"Lotus Partners"** and ended up at <http://www.lotus.com/partners.nsf>, where they clicked the link and went to the page shown in Figure 2.4. Unless there's enough information on the Lotusphere 98 page, this visitor has no knowledge that the home page, shown in Figure 2.3, even exists or that Lotus has information on Lotus Products on another page. That information comes in the form of navigational links—graphic-, text-, or frame-based.

NAVIGATING THROUGH YOUR SITE

In navigating a Web site, you need to consider several factors:

- The first screen
- Navigational tools—graphics, text, frames
- Consistency

The First Screen—The Top's Gotta Pop or They're Not Gonna Stop

Don't let the cuteness of this little refrain sidetrack you from its important message. The first screen your visitor sees is the first impression they will have of your site. And keep in mind the first screen they see might *not* be the first screen of your home page. If your first screen sucks, they won't

stop, and if they don't stop, they're not going to shop. Congratulations. You've spent a lot of money on a Web site where very few people get past the first page.

As I said in Chapter 1, you've got to put your most important informational elements in the first screen because some visitors have no more than four inches of screen real estate. Also, limit your home page to no more than two or three screens worth of material because people don't like to scroll forever and ever. Remember this phrase; make it your mantra:

Display important information prominently.

If it isn't important, then it shouldn't be on the home page. It probably shouldn't be on *any* page, but you have a little more leeway with subsidiary pages because you've got a little more space to maneuver.

Navigational Tools—Graphics, Text, Frames

There are three main navigational tools, which you can use singly or in combination:

Navigational Graphics

Text

Frames

Navigational Graphics There are two categories of navigational graphics:

Buttons

Imagemaps

A button is any graphic that's a link. Any time someone clicks a button, they should be taken to another page. Buttons make powerful navigational tools. Use them carefully. When you're using graphics, for example, make sure people don't confuse them with links. Figure 2.5 shows an image that looks like it should be a button, but it isn't.

An imagemap is an image that is treated by the browser as a navigational tool. When visitors click the imagemap, they are taken to a new page. Make sure it's clear to your visitors where they are going when they click on a particular location on an imagemap.

It's the reverse of a magic trick. In a magic trick, you show the audience your right hand and perform the trick with your left. In Web design, you tell them where you're going first—and then go there.

Text Text links make excellent navigational tools, although you can go a little overboard, as Figure 2.6 indicates. Even though the folks here are a little link happy, you've got to love them for creating a page that totals only 15.8K in size. You won't have to wait days for this page to load.

Text links are very, very important; they are even more important on pages that use graphics and imagemaps as links.

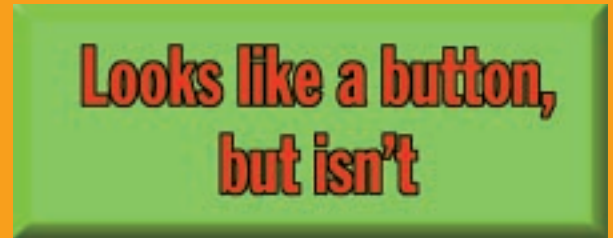


FIGURE 2.5 Confusing button



FIGURE 2.6 William and Mary Computer Science (<http://cs.wm.edu/>)



FIGURE 2.7 Southwest Airlines
(<http://www.iflyswa.com/>)

If you're using graphics or imagemaps as links, you must also have corresponding text links.

There are two reasons for this statement. The first is if you're being a bad girl or boy and the graphics on your page total more than 35K, the text will show up before the images and your visitors can happily click a text link and be on their merry way before the image

loads. The second reason is if your page has an imagemap and your visitor hits the Stop button before the imagemap loads, they won't know where they're going when they click. If there are no text links on the page, then they'll have to either reload the page or click and hope.

The big graphic in Figure 2.7 is a perfect example of a site that has an imagemap, but no text links. This is bad Web design. I'll talk more about this site later in the chapter.

Frames Frames were created by Netscape to answer the perplexing question, "How can I make my page easy to navigate?" Like so many other great ideas, this one also got perverted by the design community. When used properly, however, frames solve the dilemma of keeping the text links static so you don't have to constantly reload them. Figure 2.8 shows you how WebPagesThatSuck.com uses frames.

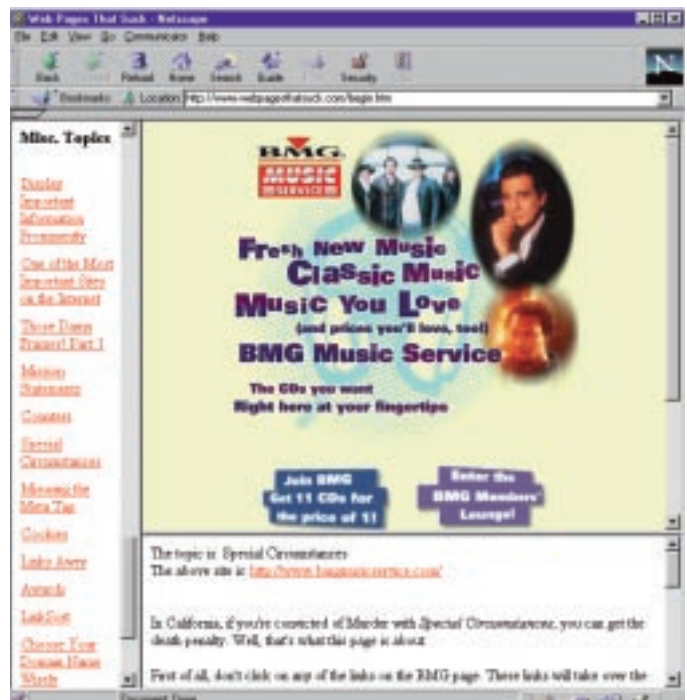


FIGURE 2.8 Frames at WebPagesThatSuck.com
(<http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com/begin.htm>)

The frame on the left is the navigational tool. When you click a link in the left-hand frame, the site in question pops up in the top right-hand frame while the witty, yet insightful commentary appears in the bottom right-hand frame. The navigational frame never changes.

Frames are controversial. Not so much because they are bad in and of themselves, but because people use them poorly. We'll examine frames in Chapter 6, "Frames and Links."



FIGURE 2.9 The wrong way to do buttons

Consistency

You need to be consistent in the design of your navigational tools. For example, the size and color of your buttons should be consistent. Figure 2.9 shows you the wrong way to use buttons. As you can see, using buttons with different colors and sizes looks unprofessional.

Figures 2.10 and 2.11 show two great examples of consistent navigational tools. The first page, shown in Figure 2.10, is a home page for a software product that converts word-processing documents into HTML. Notice the navigational bar on the left-hand side of the page; the depressed Home page button signifies which page you're visiting. Figure 2.11 shows the page for the Wang document conversion; as on the previous page, the Wang button is depressed to indicate you're on the Wang page. Total consistency.

Location When you place your navigational buttons on the page, make sure that if you place them at the



FIGURE 2.10 The navigational button bar at the WebConvert home page
(<http://www.webconvert.com/>)



FIGURE 2.11 The navigational button bar at the WebConvert Wang Version page
(<http://www.webconvert.com/html/wang.htm>)

top of your home page, they're on the top of every other page in your site. If you place them on the left-hand side of the home page, then they should be on the left-hand side of every other page. The WebConvert navigational tools, shown in Figures 2.10 and 2.11, follow this guideline. All of them are located on the left-hand side of the page.

Simple Concepts

It's a very simple concept—every navigational tool has to have a consistent look and location. Navigation should always be predictable. You want to create navigational tools that...

Are in the same spot on every page.

Have the same look.

You don't want to use round buttons on the home page and square buttons on main topic pages and octagonal buttons on subsidiary pages.

Will get the visitor to the information in as few clicks as possible.

I'm sure someone has researched the "Click Annoyance Factor"—the maximum number of clicks the average person is willing to perform to get to the information—but I haven't found this information on the Net. Personally, if I can't get to the information in three clicks and the site doesn't have a search engine, I'm ready to go somewhere else.

THE TOUR

Now that you understand how a site should be designed and how important it is to offer navigational tools, let's take a tour of some sites on the Internet and see how they measure up. We'll examine the first site thoroughly to make sure you understand the concepts of site design and navigation and then quickly run through some sucky and unsucky sites.

For each site, we'll check its

- Design
- Navigation
- Pluses
- Problems

Light Me Up! Cigar Aficionado Magazine

At the beginning of this chapter, we talked about how the first page of a site is like the cover of a magazine, so it's appropriate that the first site we discuss is actually a newsstand magazine.

The mystique of Cigar Aficionado magazine is sort of lost on Michael and me because, believe it or not, neither of us smoke cigars. (I tried to smoke Tiparillo's the end of my freshman year in college—but it *was* my freshman year.)

The most we can figure out, based on the Web site, is it appeals to those people who feel the "Good Life" consists of Art (their idea of art in the issue we looked at was Vargas, LeRoy Neiman, Frank Stella), Sports (golf, deep-sea sportfishing, tennis, boxing, bullfighting, hawking, polo), Music (samba), Fashion, Gambling (poker, hustling golf), Jewelry and Collectibles, and Leisure (expensive cars, model railroads, chess, dream boats, high-speed power boats, treasure hunting in the sea, high-end stereo equipment). On this list, I'm 0 for 7; Mike is 2 out of 7. Nevertheless, you don't have to understand the cigar lifestyle to understand the design.

Site Design at Cigar Aficionado Michael and I both think the site design is superb.

Figure 2.12 shows the Cigar Aficionado magazine as it would appear on a 13–15-inch monitor. Let's examine how its design succeeds and, more importantly, how you can use the same principles to make your site a success.

The most important design element on this page is something you can't see.

The designer sat down and organized the site before they started writing the HTML and creating the graphics. If designers do their job properly, you won't even notice how successful they were. In this case, the designer broke down the elements of the magazine into different pieces and chose what was important.

Navigation at Cigar Aficionado In Figure 2.13, I've labeled the page so you can see the navigational structure of the home page.

The section marked "A" shows how the designer cleverly worked the most important topics into the top of the page. I stressed this concept back in Chapter 1 and again at the beginning of this chapter. These are the important topics I'm talking about here:

1. **Contact Us.** Make sure there's a way for visitors to contact you.
2. **Subscribe.** It's a magazine. They want you to subscribe. That's how they get money. Money is good. The fact that they don't offer subscriptions using a secure server is a potential security problem and would probably scare most people from ordering using their credit card. It would be interesting to know how many subscribers they've actually received from the Internet.
3. **Site Index.** If your site is divided up into many different areas, you'll want to include a site index (also called a *site map* or *site guide*). Your site index should be text based. Don't use graphics; they take too long to load.

The section marked "B" shows you a portion of a navigational bar where it looks like they've listed most of the important topics near the top. Interestingly, the Gift Shop is at the bottom, but that's probably okay because maybe they're trying not to look too pushy. Personally, Michael and I would have moved it closer to the top.



FIGURE 2.12 Cigar Aficionado magazine
(<http://www.cigaraficionado.com/>)

B The navigational bar

A The most important topics



FIGURE 2.13 The navigational structure of the Cigar Aficionado magazine site

While a visitor must scroll down to see all the topics, there's enough information at the top of the page for them to get a good start on touring the important sections of the site.

Figure 2.14 shows the navigational structure of Cigar Ratings—one of the main topic pages. Notice that the round part of the label on the Cigar Ratings button has turned red. Obviously, you can look at the top of the page and see its title, but this touch is a nice one to add to the button. When you want to go to another topic, you won't click the Cigar Ratings button because it's turned red, which, as we all know, should make you want to stop. It's worth noting, however, that if you went to the Retailers page, there's no special marking to indicate you've been to the Cigar Ratings page. That's the province of text links. Nevertheless, the navigational information on this main topic page and on its subsidiary pages is excellent.



FIGURE 2.14

Cigar Ratings page

(<http://www.cigaraficionado.com/Cigar/Aficionado/ratings.html>)

Pluses in the Cigar Aficionado Site First of all, the designer chose wonderful colors for the site based on the brown color of cigars. Most important, these colors are used in a consistent fashion throughout the site.

The link graphics are also wonderful—little cigar wrappers—and so very, very clever. The home page is uncluttered, and the other graphics add to the flavor (pardon the pun) of the page. There's one animated GIF image (the Hot Tip at the top of the left-hand navigation bar), but it's excellent (see Figure 2.12). While the graphic titled “Vote” is probably clip art, it's professional clip art (see Figure 2.1).

The site reeks (again, pardon the pun) of sophistication and elegance.

Problems in the Cigar Aficionado Site Even though we both like the page, there are six potential problems:

1. The HEIGHT and WIDTH parameters are not set for the images. As you will learn in Chapter 4, setting these parameters would cause the text to appear before the images on the page and give the viewer the opportunity to click a text link rather than wait for all the images to load.
2. Speaking of text links, *there are no text links on the front page*. Oops. That's a design no-no. Michael and I suggest they put text links at the bottom of the page.
3. Dr. HTML (see the sidebar “Dr. HTML”) reported that the page contained 84.8K worth of graphics and images on the day we visited. This means it would take between 24.1 seconds (on a 28.8Kbps modem) and 48.3 seconds (on a 14.4Kbps modem) to load the page (and probably longer because of the Java on the

page, but Dr. HTML doesn't measure Java applets). The people visiting this site probably don't care how long it takes for the page to load because of the content. (We could make a snide statement that the people who visit this site are all probably wealthy Republicans with ISDN connections, but we won't.) The cigar industry is a wonderful vertical niche market, and people who visit niche sites really don't care too much about download time.

4. It would be nice if there were a search engine facility on the front page. They have a link to their search engine tucked away at the bottom of the Site Index page, but they should really have one on the front page.
5. The site uses Java, and using it doesn't seem to enhance the site.
6. The site uses *Cookies*. These pesky little tracking devices basically track your movements on this site. I'm not sure why they need them, but using Cookies could turn off some visitors.

All six of these elements are flaws in the site's design, but numbers 1 and 2 are certainly the worst ones.

Let's stroll around and examine a few more sites to see if we can figure out what the designer was thinking when they designed the site.

Dr.HTML is one of the Most Important Sites on the Internet.

The good doctor analyzes pages that physically reside on the Internet (have a URL) for errors and loading time. One of the many errors it looks for are missing HEIGHT and WIDTH parameters in images. In some of the examples used in this chapter, (Cigar Aficionado, United Airlines, and Lotus) these parameters were missing.

There are lots of HTML validation services on the Web—including those that don't charge fees. As always, check out Yahoo's page on the topic at http://www.yahoo.com/Computers_and_Internet/Information_and_Documentation/Data_Formats/HTML/Validation_and_Checkers/.



TOO COOL

Dr. HTML



Dr. HTML

(<http://drhtml.imagiware.com/>)

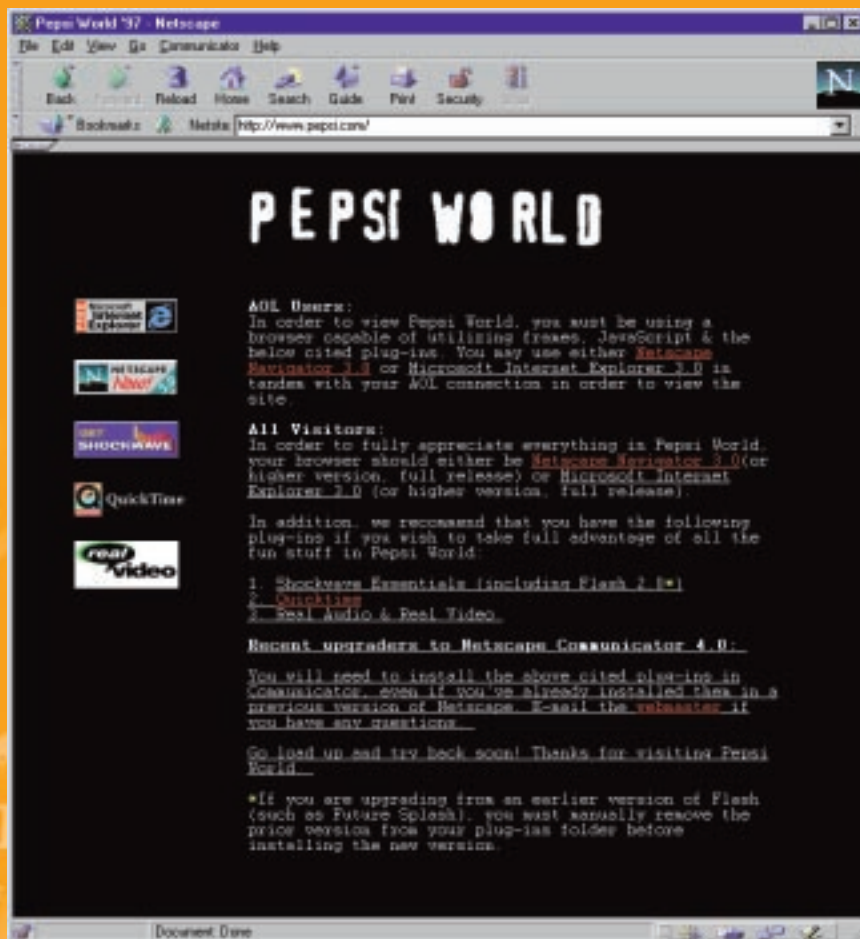


FIGURE 2.15 The Pepsi site
(<http://www.pepsi.com/>)

You're Not Cool Enough. Go Away!

Figure 2.15 shows us Pepsi's home page.

This home page is stunning. Not stunning as in “stunningly beautiful,” but stunning as in “I’ve just been poked by a stun gun, and I’m in a lot of freaking pain.” As a Web designer, the last thing you want to do is keep people away from your site, but that seems to be the concept here. What this page is saying is, “If you don’t have these plug-ins, then go away because we don’t want you.” Normally, I don’t have a problem with plug-ins except that I often have to reinstall all of them every time a new release of my browser is issued—as one of the paragraphs of text on the Pepsi home page relates.

When I looked at this site, my first reaction was “The heck with this, I’m going elsewhere.” But I decided to go to the next page and after fumbling around, trying to figure out where to click to get to the next page (the Pepsi World logo was the magic spot), I got the scare of my life. You have only to look at Figure 2.16 to understand.

After recovering from the shock, I tried to figure out where I was supposed to click to get to the next page. Basically, I had to move my cursor over the whole screen while looking at the status bar to

figure it out. The four “magic spots” are those white circular scribblings. Bad, bad design.

As with so many other things in life, Michael, my partner in crime, initially held a contrary viewpoint about the Pepsi site. “I will admit at first glance I liked the layout. I wasn’t bothered by all the plug-in requirements because I have them all—I like plug-ins! I’m a plug-in maniac! So I decided to peruse the site. Unfortunately it’s a graphic behemoth! It looks like Photoshop puked here. If I had a day to spend (which I don’t), I couldn’t visit all the pages on this site, not because there are so many, but because it takes forever for the graphics to load. I had to take a Dramamine after viewing all their gut-wrenching animations! It’s a good thing I didn’t want to know anything about Pepsi, because, as far as I could tell, there’s nothing here specifically dealing with Pepsi.”

Site Design at Pepsi Don’t use any of the techniques you see here. If there’s a worthwhile site design technique used here, neither Michael nor I can find it.

Navigation at Pepsi This is an oxymoron like “fresh frozen.” This site fails Navigation 101.

Pluses at Pepsi None.

Problems at Pepsi The whole site.

Eight Miles High: United Airlines

Figure 2.17 shows you the United Airlines home page, another excellently designed site.

Site Design at United Interestingly, this is one the few sites that has the right to use the clichéd outer-space background and animated spinning-globe GIF and can make it work. More amazingly, their use of a globe actually makes complete sense. You can’t tell,



FIGURE 2.16 Holy moly, I’ve drunk too much Pepsi.
(http://www.pepsi.com/main/nav/home_main1.html)

but the globe is animated, and it is actually one of the coolest animated GIF images Michael and I have seen (the word *Index* is stationary). Why can they get away with using these clichés? They’re an airline. Airlines fly in the sky. United flies around the world. They can use these images. Joe’s Air Conditioning can’t.



FIGURE 2.17 United Airlines
(<http://www.ual.com/>)

Navigation at United Instead of using a list of links in the usual boring manner (on the left side), they came up with a clever and artistic way to present them—you click the planet and you go to the page. For example, clicking the pilot takes you to the Flight Info/Reservations page. It's easy to navigate to the main topic pages and subsidiary pages and back.

Pluses at United Nothing out of the ordinary. It's just a well-thought out site. It's very easy to navigate the site because the navigation tools are consistently placed and cover the main topics a traveler needs to use.

Problems at United While the animated spinning globe is really cool, what is seriously *uncool* about the image is its 130K size (the whole page is 176.8K). Way,

way, too big. After all, this is a site where you want people to make airline reservations on your carrier—right? Why make it difficult for them by making them wait? Michael and I know this animated image is very cool, but you can't fall in love with your own design. It's possible people won't wait long enough to book a reservation. Hmm. That defeats the purpose of the site.

Another minus is none of the images on the home page have the

HEIGHT and WIDTH parameters set. Finally, there are no text links. If the imagemap doesn't load, you really can't surf.

Another Airline: Southwest Airlines

I'm sure that Southwest Airlines doesn't like being referred to as "another airline," but it's the second one we're looking at, so it's another airline. Figure 2.18 shows you their home page.

This site is where Michael and I pull our Siskel & Ebert routine (international readers, see the sidebar "Siskel & Ebert" for an explanation). I (Ebert) think the home page is okay, while Michael (Siskel) thinks it sucks like a bilge pump. If this were a TV show it would go like this:

Michael: I'm sure someone put time into creating their ugly 46K "takes-forever-to-load"

navigational imagemap. By the way, if you hit the Stop button before it loads, you won't be able to go to the *bleep* (pejorative term deleted) president's message page—which is too bad because he's manually indicating the number of people that have ever visited his page.

Vincent: Yeah, no text links certainly sucks, but I don't mind the motif of the ticket counter. Besides this home page loads faster than United Airlines. And I think having the president's face there is a nice touch.

Michael: You find him attractive?

I then rush over and start beating on Michael's head with a copy of *Creating Killer Web Sites*, which Michael usually has hidden in a drawer. Pandemonium results, and the whole scene ends up being shown on CNN.

Site Design at Southwest Artistically, it's not as pleasing as the United Airlines site, but, then again, it's 49K in size versus United's 176K size. Hmm. Also remember that Southwest prides itself on being an inexpensive carrier, and the minimalist design here works just fine. The pages load quickly.

A case *can* be made that the site looks as if it was made on the cheap. Since Southwest prides itself on being a low-cost carrier, that's consistent with their corporate philosophy of providing value.

Navigation at Southwest Once again, they've taken the minimalist approach, and it seems to work. They don't have buttons for all their topics, just the ones that count (translation: the ones that will bring in money)—Reservations, Flight Schedule, Frequent Flyer Program, and so on. Very nice.

Pluses at Southwest The main pluses about the site are the fast loading times and easy navigation. Look, it ain't pretty folks, but it's functional. There's something to be said for functional. Yes, it could be prettier and still load fast, but I don't think anyone but Michael is going to gag at the look of this site.

Minuses at Southwest Michael thinks it looks cheesy, and a case can be made for that viewpoint. One reason it's cheesy is the tacky blue border around the picture; they should have turned the border off around the picture. While the desk is nicely rendered (it has dimension to it), every other piece of art is flat and one-dimensional. Southwest is trying to have a realistic look, but then they add the flat art work and it causes dissonance—or as Michael phrased it: “That's an awfully big word to use for *dorky*.”

While the concept of a virtual ticket counter is excellent, the execution is poor.

Siskel and Ebert

Later in the book, you'll hear about avoiding jargon in your Web site. If you need proof that it's a good idea to keep jargon and nation-specific information out of your Web site, this Siskel & Ebert reference is a perfect example.

While many Americans will catch the reference, most, if not all, international visitors will be left out in the dark. So, for those nice international readers, here's a short explanation.

In the United States, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert are two movie reviewers who work for different newspapers in Chicago, Illinois—hence, they are competitors. One of them won the Pulitzer Prize (a big deal in America) and periodically reminds the other he never won one. Siskel is the tall, balding guy, and Ebert is the short, stocky man with lots of hair. Sort of a Mutt and Jeff combination—oops, another reference even many Americans won't catch. Forget the Mutt and Jeff reference.

Siskel and Ebert have a TV show where they sit in a faux movie theater balcony and rate the movies coming out during the week. The premise is they don't really like each other, and sometimes they argue in a reasonably civilized manner about why the other one wouldn't know a good movie if it came up and bit him on the ass. Everyone who watches the show does so partly because they hope that one day, one of the two will snap and start choking the other one. Like ancient Roman emperors, they give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down sign to the movies they like or dislike respectively.

As I said, jargon and nation-specific references make for a bad Web page.

Siskel and Ebert's Web site is at <http://siskel-ebert.com>.



FIGURE 2.18

Southwest Airlines

(http://www.iflyswa.com/)

Out-of-Place Graphics: Kenwood Home and Car Audio

Figure 2.19 is the home page for Kenwood Home and Car Audio. Michael and I actually agree about the design.

Site Design at Kenwood The page uses graphics in a consistent manner, and the designer certainly thought about the organization of the site. But, as Michael so aptly put it, “I think marble backgrounds went out of style in the 70s or were they ever in? And what’s up with the homeless looking guy in the picture? And what does that picture say about audio systems? I’m stumped.” I wasn’t thrilled with the concept either. Why are they using a hotel as the motif? If you go to the Kenwood Gear page, the motif is a laundry room—yes, Kenwood t-shirts need to be laundered, but the concept of a hotel is a stretch and poorly thought out.

Navigation at Kenwood The navigational tools used are well done, and the site is easy to navigate. Notice how the designer put the most important pages at the top of the directory—Catalog, Build a Home System, Build a Car System, Contests, and Product Help Center.

But there's one flaw that just drives me crazy. On the directory, the very first link is the Lobby. You've got to have that on the other pages, but not on the home page—if you click the link, you just reload the page.

Pluses at Kenwood Nothing I haven't said before.

Problems at Kenwood The home page takes up a little over 63K in size—that's over even the Microsoft recommended amount. Also, the images don't have the HEIGHT and WIDTH parameters set.

Text Is Just All Right with Me: Red Hat Software

All of the previous sites have been graphics-based. Figure 2.20 shows that Red Hat Software can design a reasonably effective site using text-based navigational tools.

Site Design at Red Hat Software

As you can see, the folks at Red Hat have taken a text-based approach to their site. The links on the left seem to be in logical order and also seem to cover the major topics:

- Secure Server (how they get paid)
- FTP Server
- Products
- Support
- Company Info
- Linux Info

The nicest part about their text-based approach is the page is only 22K in size and loads quickly.



FIGURE 2.19 Kenwood Home and Car Audio
(<http://www.kenwoodusa.com/>)

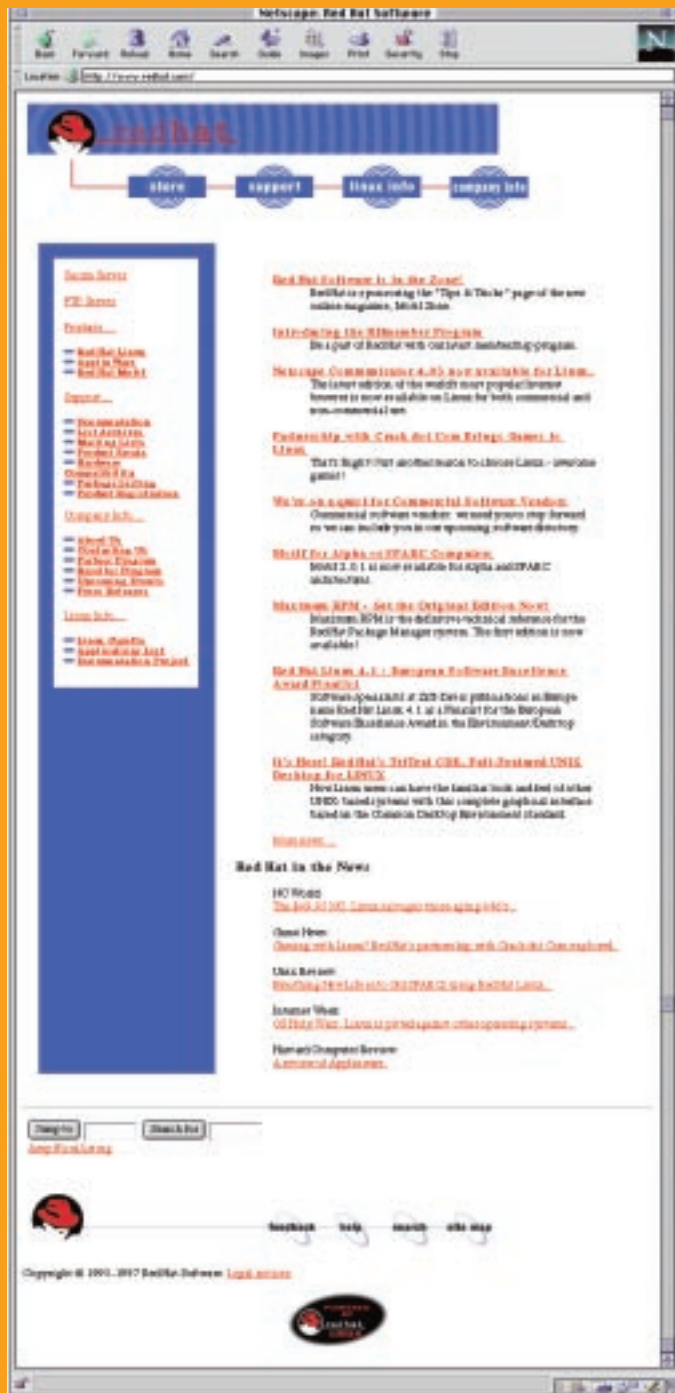


FIGURE 2.20 Red Hat Software
(<http://www.redhat.com/>)

Even though the site takes the minimalist approach to the use of graphics, it is, nonetheless, fairly effective. Yes, it's plain and not very exciting, but that's okay. This approach would not work with Cigar Aficionado, but for a software site it's fine. Later, in Chapter 4, you'll read about another software company who went way overboard and has a site that can't hold a candle to Red Hat.

Navigation at Red Hat Software The navigational aspects of Red Hat Software could be a lot better, as Figure 2.21 demonstrates. This figure is a little deceiving. There are image links to Support, Linux Info, and Company Info. However, you always need to have a link to the money page—the page where a visitor can order your products. It's also a good idea to have a contact link on each page so your visitors can contact you. Red Hat has such a link, but it's at the bottom of the page, and the links at the bottom should really be at the top of the page. If you're going to have your graphic links at the top of the page, then the links at the bottom of the page should be textual duplicates of the links at the top.

Pluses at Red Hat Software Nothing out of the ordinary. The pages load quickly, and you can find your way around the site without *too* much trouble. It's a very Spartan site, but being Spartan isn't bad.

Problems at Red Hat Software The designer at Red Hat may have taken the concept of text just a little too far. I realize that UNIX is a “text-based system” and UNIX works like nothing more than to read those technical UNIX books—you know, the ones with the animals on the cover. However,

there's just a little too much text on the pages to make me feel comfortable. Figure 2.22 shows a typical page on the site.

Well, that should cover it for the general tour. Next, we're going to look at some bad home-page design techniques.

Bad Home-Page Design Techniques

No, you're not going to see a whole slew of badly designed home pages. You're just going to look at some techniques that impede the visitor from visiting your site.

Forcible Entry: Herbal.com

Figure 2.23 shows you a technique Michael and I don't see much anymore on commercial or educational pages (thank goodness). But just because we haven't seen it in awhile doesn't mean it doesn't exist or won't make a comeback. It most frequently shows up on personal pages (why it's even used there is beyond us), but there's no valid reason why it's necessary under any circumstance.

What's evil about this page is the JavaScript on the Herbal.com site that requests a name be entered before the visitor proceeds. On a commercial or informational site, you don't want to do anything that impedes your visitor's progress into your site. You don't want to chase them away.



FIGURE 2.21

The Red Hat Store

(<http://www.redhat.com/products/>)

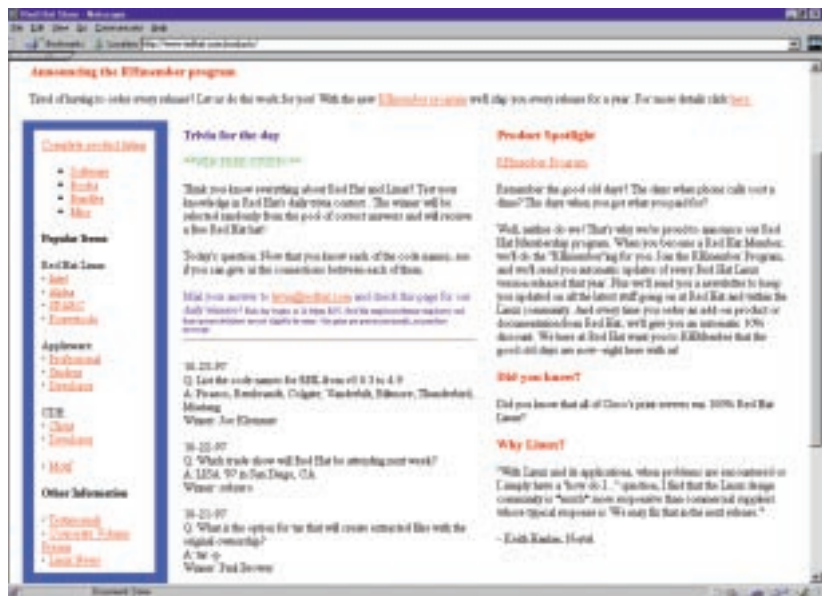


FIGURE 2.22

Too much text at the Red Hat Store

(<http://www.redhat.com/products/>)



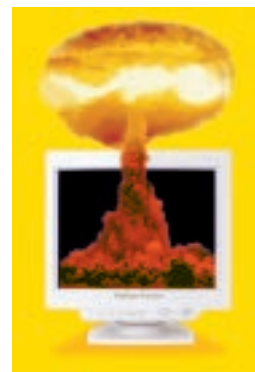
FIGURE 2.23 Why oh why? Herbal.com goes weird.



FIGURE 2.24 The old splash page for vincentflanders.com (<http://www.vincentflanders.com/old>)

While Michael and I realize that there are very few absolutes in Web page design, this technique is an absolute—bad one to use. For that reason, we’re going to:

NUKE IT!



What Do I Do Now? vincentflanders.com

Figure 2.24 shows the former *splash page* at my personal Web site. A splash page is different from a home page. A splash page is traditionally used for a first “splash” of art, which then transports you automatically to the “real” home page. In some instances, the user has to click to gain access to the home page. Splash pages can be confusing to visitors unless there are specific instructions on what they should do to gain entry to the home page.

This page is a parody of a famous Web designer’s splash page. I parodied this look on his page because...that’s the kind of guy I am.

There are, however, a few problems with this type of splash page:

1. The visitor is never sure when the page has stopped loading, and that’s frustrating.
2. Because there are no text links to click, the visitor has to wait until they see the Document Done message in the status bar before proceeding.
3. The visitor doesn’t have any idea where they’re going when they click a picture. This adds nothing to the design of the site.

You don’t ever want to confuse people when they go to your site. They need to know where they are and what they should do.

Exceptions As always, there is an exception, and this one actually makes sense, as illustrated in Figure 2.25.

The one exception to the rule is the type of site that has both an artistic sense and also downloads quickly. The Surface Type home page is about 12K in size—small enough to load quickly—and the designers have a great artistic sense, which they better have if they’re going to design typefaces.

While it’s artistic and doesn’t annoy us because it loads quickly, imagine how you’d feel if you had to wait for 60K worth of images to load?

Now that you’ve seen several different aspects of design, I bet you want the answer to the question: “How do I design a site?” The answer: “Storyboards.”

DESIGNING YOUR SITE USING STORYBOARDS

It’s easy to look at the sites in this chapter and say, “Yes, that one is good” and “Yes, that one is bad.” What’s difficult is putting what you’ve seen about good design and navigation into practice on your sites.

Because you can easily get instantaneous feedback by writing HTML, there’s a tendency to fall into the trap of “code before you think.” Your problem is you need to create a home page. Your solution is to start writing HTML as fast as your stubby little fingers can type. This approach is the “There’s never time to do it right, but there’s always time to do it over—and

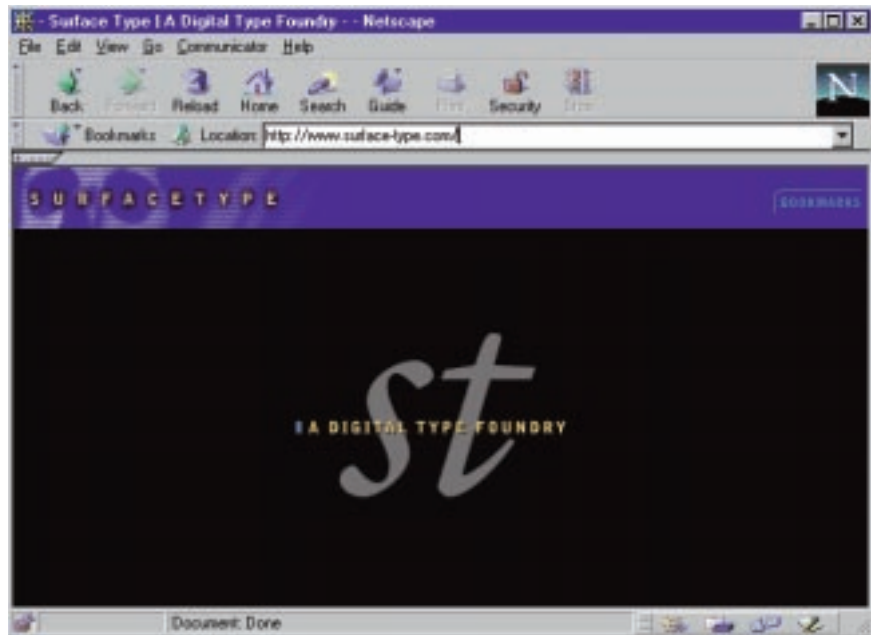


FIGURE 2.25 Surface Type
(<http://www.surface-type.com/>)

over and over again” approach to Web design. You waste both time and energy. (Of course, if you’re billing by the hour and your client is dumb and rich...)

If you just sat down and planned your site, however, you wouldn’t end up with a dozen iterations and wasted hours—but this takes organization, a quality some of us lack.

To show you how the storyboard approach works, Michael and I will use Michael’s WillieBoy.com site as an example. Michael bought the domain name willieboy.com for his line of surf wear. Next, he decided to throw together a placeholder page in case somebody accidentally wandered into his site. Figure 2.26 is what Michael ended up putting on his placeholder page.

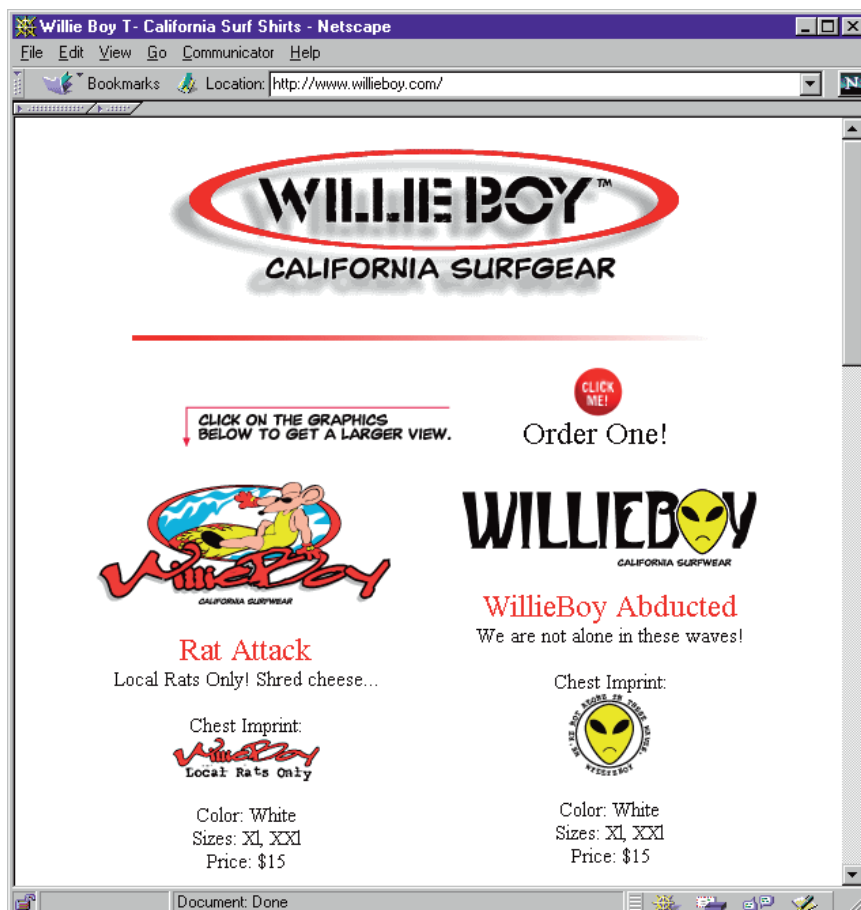


FIGURE 2.26 The WillieBoy placeholder page
(<http://www.willieboy.com/>)

There's not much here. You can click the thumbnail images and see a bigger version of the image. The only link to another page is the Order One button, which takes you to a form that is *not* on a secure server.

This placeholder page is good enough until Michael decides to start marketing his clothing line on the Web. Now that Michael has decided to really create the site, he must go through the process of storyboarding. He takes an unusual approach by creating his storyboards in Illustrator or PageMaker. As he

puts it, "You can use any program that allows you to draw little boxes and put type in them. Of course, the old-fashioned 'pencil and paper' works fine, too." Because I use Windows NT, I use a copy of Visio 2 I purchased years and years ago to storyboard.

Storyboard—Step One

Michael's first step is to talk to me about the site. My background is in marketing, so I'm great at coming up with ideas for other people to implement <grin>. There didn't seem to be a lot of content to draw people in on Michael's placeholder page, so I told him that he'd better add something or he'd get a bunch of people who'd visit only once. The obvious starting point for content would be surf-related information, such as surfing condition reports, surf music lists, and so on. I also suggested adding a page

showing different surfer tattoos, but Michael misunderstood; he thought I said he should create a line of "temporary tattoos with a surfing theme." I quickly confirmed that's what I actually said. Sometimes it pays to slur your ideas.

Storyboard—Step Two

Next, Michael had to figure out what the main topic pages were going to be. Here's what he decided:

- Garments
- Order Form
- WillieBoy's Favorite Surf Links
- Tour of the Shirt Shop
- Photo Contest

Photo Contest is actually a misnomer. It will really be a photo gallery where Michael will display photographs of people wearing WillieBoy t-shirts—a very clever marketing concept where visitors get their 15 minutes of fame on the Net.

If you're thinking of having a real contest on your site, you'll need to consult with a lawyer about the different legalities.

Storyboard—Step Three

With these ideas in hand, Michael starts the WillieBoy storyboard; the first version is shown in Figure 2.27, and the second version is shown in Figure 2.28.

Let's see what he was thinking when he created his first version. Michael drew the first box, which represents the home page. Then he drew the row of major topic pages with links to the subsidiary pages.



FIGURE 2.27 The first draft of the WillieBoy California Surfwear site

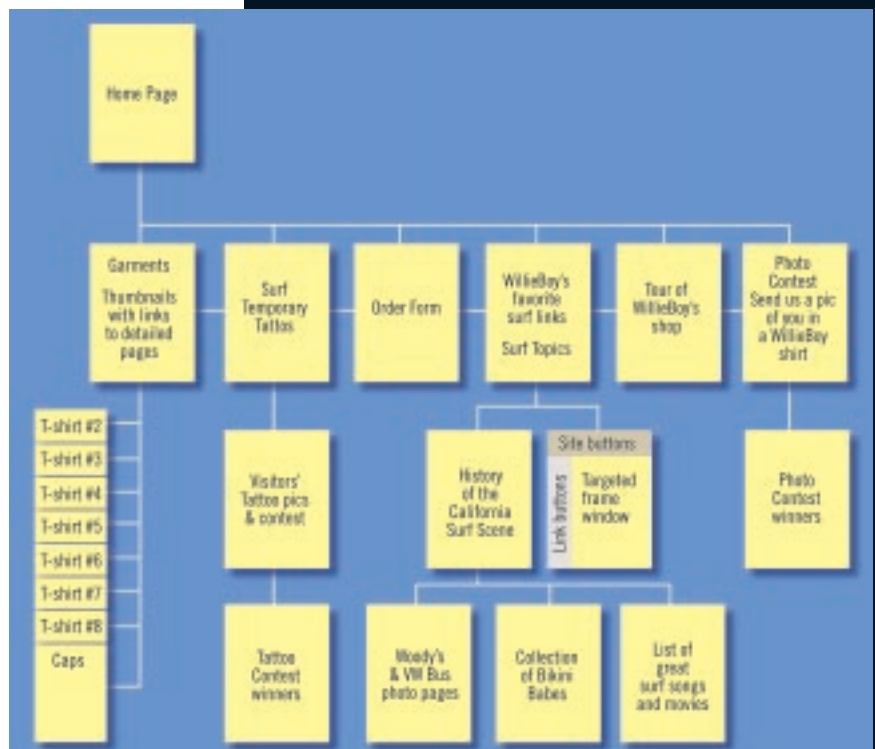


FIGURE 2.28 The second draft of the WillieBoy California Surfwear site



FIGURE 2.29 The final sketch for WillieBoy

Storyboard—Step Four

Michael then e-mailed me the TIF image file of the storyboard, and we discussed what changes should be made. I thought the temporary tattoos should be moved up from a subsidiary page and made a major topics page. Michael expressed concern about WillieBoy's Favorite Links page. He didn't like the fact that people could just click a link and leave his site—"Perhaps never to return again!"

How did Michael solve this problem? He explains: "Vincent came up with the layout for the links page. On this page, I wanted to feature daily surf reports, related articles, and so on, but I didn't want my visitors actually leaving. Vincent's solution was to use frames.

In most cases I hate frames, but here it really made sense. When a visitor clicks a link, it will target my frame window, but my WillieBoy buttons/links will still be visible."

The revised storyboard is shown in Figure 2.28.

The total time spent creating the two storyboards, including consulting with me, was one and one-half hours.



Creating the Home Page

After creating the storyboard, Michael sits down in front of the TV and sketches the design for the home page on tissue paper while watching back-to-back episodes of *Seinfeld*. (Another strictly American reference. *Seinfeld* is best described as a very strange comedy only Americans would like.) While watching the show, he sketches three or four possible designs. If he gets a new idea, he slaps a new sheet of tissue paper on top of the old piece, traces the elements he wants to keep, and then adds the new elements.

During this process, Michael puts the different elements into a page grid because he knows that great Web sites are created using tables. After he makes the mock up, he'll put all the elements into a table so his grid design will translate to the screen. Figure 2.29 shows that the page is a simple table that consists of only one row and two columns.

This book assumes some basic knowledge of HTML, so if you need to learn how to make tables, an excellent online source is Table Tutor at

<http://junior.apk.net/jbarta/tutor/tables/index.html>.

Time spent on the different versions of the home page was one hour; total time invested so far is two and one-half hours.

Besides watching two episodes of *Seinfeld* and sketching the layout of the home page, Michael decided on the following elements:

The color scheme Michael wants to use bright “retro” colors for the links, the background, and the graphics, and he wants to use browser-safe colors. You'll learn about browser-safe colors in Chapter 4, but here's a quick explanation.

There are 216 “safe” colors a designer can use that will be seen by both Windows and Macintosh users without the image being messed up (the technical term for *messed up* is *dithered*). While 216 colors sounds like a lot, it isn't. You have to make a choice—“Do I design my pages for everyone or do I design them to please myself (or my client)?” Of course, if it's a client you have to please, let the client make the final decision.

Michael is “stuck” with using the black and red colors of the WillieBoy logo because the logo was created long before the Web site was a gleam in his eye. If you're a Web page designer, you'll find out that preexisting logos will be the norm. While it can be hard to turn them into browser-safe colors, I'll discuss a way around the problem in Chapter 4. Michael chose a browser-safe autumn gold color for the navigation bar. Because he's using different gradations of teal in the image at the top-left of the page, he won't be able to use browser-safe colors on the image at the top left (this will be a surfer image).

The fonts Michael is stuck with using the default fonts for the text, but he decides to use the same font used in the WillieBoy logo for the navigational text. He also decides to use a third font for headlines, the top headline being “We Found the Missing Links!”

The look of the images Because this is, obviously, a surf-oriented site, the images need to have a surf flavor.

After making these decisions, Michael creates his home page in Photoshop. Yes, Photoshop. (Normally, a designer creates the graphics individually in

Use Your Images

More Than Once!

Michael will use the original navigational images throughout the site. Why?

Because the first time a page is loaded, the images will be stored in the visitor's cache. The next time the images are needed they won't have to be fetched from a faraway server, they'll be pulled from the cache and will therefore load more quickly than they loaded the first time. Repeating images throughout the site also adds the element of consistency to the design.

Photoshop and then aligns them in the HTML page by creating tables. Michael's approach is different because he creates the whole page as one large graphic.) Figure 2.30 shows the first rendition.



FIGURE 2.30 The WillieBoy home page—created in Photoshop

Obviously, Michael already had the logo, so he creates the navigational items and then the text. At the moment, he inserts nonsense text until he comes up with what he actually wants to use. This is, after all, a mock-up.

After he's happy with how the page looks, he'll cut up one large Photoshop image into separate graphic elements and insert them into an HTML document using tables to align them. Michael learned this slick technique from another designer. Because Michael is going to use the images on his site, he doesn't just spit them out; he spends about four hours on the page. The total time spent so far is six and one-half hours.

The reason I said the page is a first rendition is that Michael made one mistake and left one thing out. Looking back at the storyboard in Figure 2.28, you can see he left off WillieBoy's Favorite Surf Links/Surf Topics. I also think he needs a contact button after Photo Contest. You always want to give your visitors a way to contact you—even if it's just by phone.

Michael will repeat the navigation bar on the second page. Why? It makes the page load faster.

Creating the Rest of the Site

Michael will go through the same process for each of the main topic pages and subsidiary pages. His task is easier because the important design decisions have been made. The only major work that's left is adding the actual content and creating whatever new images are required.

The Value of Organizing via Storyboards

It should be obvious that organizing the design process by using storyboards can save a significant amount of time. There were only two iterations of the storyboard, and there were just two iterations for the home page. This sure beats the “code before you think” approach, which is similar to the joke about the airline pilot who gets on the speaker to inform the passengers, “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain. I've got good news and bad news. The good news is we're making record time. The bad news is we're lost.”

Now just because your visitors won't get lost navigating your Web site, doesn't mean you can sit back and congratulate yourself. You've got to bring that plane in for a landing. Unless your site has content—the most important element in Web design—your visitors might leave in record time. In the next chapter, you'll learn why Content Is King.



TOO COOL

Tip Worth the Price of the Book

This tip is so simple, it's almost insulting to have me mention it—spend 99 cents to get yourself a notebook. Why? You need to keep track of everything that's specific to your site. Because two hours after you finish a project, you're going to forget every parameter you set.

What You Need to Keep Track of

Graphics.

Colors (both hexadecimal and RGB values).

Image sizes.

Fonts used for the text (if applicable) and the font size, leading, spacing, color, and style.

Filter settings—bevels and their parameters. Try to reproduce that bevel angle or that drop shadow two days from now. It's very, very important to write down your filter settings. You'll thank me.

Anything else you'd forget in a month—the login name and password for the FTP site, for example.