

The **Plain English** Guide to

Getting an Effective Website

Clear Information **for Businesspeople**
Who Want a Website
that Works

2004 Edition

B.J. Michaels

Introduction

The Plain English Guide to Getting an Effective Website

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Why Businesspeople Need this Manual

The goal of this manual is not to make you into a web designer. **The goal of this manual is to make sure you get an effective website.**

Developing a website takes time and money, sometimes a lot of money. In spite of this, most businesspeople **hand over control** of their web development to a third party (the web designer) **without having any idea how to measure, or influence, the effectiveness of the website they're paying for.**

Not only is this potentially disastrous, it's quite unnecessary.

Over the last ten years, researchers have discovered clear, objective principles for effective website design. It isn't guesswork any more. We **know** what makes websites bad, and what makes them effective.

We also know the cost to a business of poor website design. Jakob Nielsen, the web's foremost usability expert, writes:

“On the Web, usability is a necessary condition for survival. If a website is difficult to use, people **leave**. If the homepage fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people **leave**. If users get lost on a website, they **leave**. If a website's information is hard to read or doesn't answer users' key questions, they **leave**.”

Alertbox, August 25, 2003

<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030825.html>

(emphasis by Nielsen)

An ineffective website is a waste of your company's time and money. Yet until now, there has been no **plain English guide** for businesspeople who want to make sure that the company website will deliver maximum benefits to their business.

This manual fills that need. It explains, in clear, non-technical language, exactly what makes a website effective—and what causes users to leave a site and never come back.

Many books have been written on how to code websites. There are also innumerable technical articles and books on website design and usability. This is the first book to deliver plain-English information for businesspeople who want to make sure that the website they get is an effective one.

The information is equally valuable for developing a new site and for improving an existing site. Remember: you don't need to know the technical details behind site design. You just need to know what the final product should look like. As long as you can communicate what you want, it's up to your web designer to supply the 'how'.

This manual shows you exactly what to ask for. And what to avoid.

How this Manual is Organized

This manual is organized into three parts, to follow the normal web design process:

- Part 1: assembling site content
- Part 2: sorting content into topics
designing the site structure and navigation system
- Part 3: designing individual pages

Each chapter presents a series of plain-English principles using the following format:

- Principle:** a clear statement of the principle or objective
(i.e. WHAT the issue is)
- Discussion:** a brief explanation of WHY the principle is important,
(i.e. the BENEFITS to be gained from implementing it)
- Implementation:** plain English information on HOW to make sure the
objective is achieved. This implementation information is not
techno-speak; it's clear advice on how to get your designer
going in the right direction, and how to know that the
objective has been met.

The information is arranged with the principles at the top of each page, so **you can skim horizontally to get a broad overview** of the issues, or continue down any page to get more detail on a principle.

Acknowledgements

This manual combines the work of many different individuals and groups who are researching web usability. Because the focus is on giving plain English advice, the academic practice of documenting each assertion with footnotes and references has been largely abandoned as it seriously interferes with the readability of the text.

The sources for all data tables and direct quotes are identified. All other information has been obtained from the sources listed in Appendix D, *References and Resources*.

This elimination of footnoting and cross-referencing was done purely to improve readability, not to obscure—or co-opt—the huge contributions of knowledge that these many researchers have provided.

The author wishes to clearly acknowledge the ground-breaking contributions of all the researchers listed in Appendix D. **They discovered the usability information.** I've simply collected it, organized it, added insights based on fifteen years' experience in technical writing, and cast it into a form that's valuable to businesspeople.

Getting Started

What is Website “Usability”?

‘*Usability*’ is the term that web design researchers chose to describe the relative ease (or difficulty) of navigating through a website and getting useful information from it.

Broadly speaking, a website is defined as ‘usable’ if visitors can:

- easily find the site
- easily navigate within the site
- quickly locate the specific information they want
- easily absorb information once they find it
- easily complete transactions (e-commerce sites)

“You don’t really understand human nature unless you know why a child on a merry-go-round will wave at his parents every time around — and why his parents will always wave back.”

William D. Tammus

Any design change that makes one or more of these tasks easier to accomplish is said to improve the usability of a site. By contrast, any aspect of a site’s design that makes these tasks harder than necessary to accomplish is said to reduce the usability of the site.

In *usability testing*, web users are exposed to one or more versions of a site and asked to accomplish specific tasks, like finding information or filling out a form. As users work on the task, researchers measure things like:

- the amount of time required to do the task
- the number of mouse clicks and/or false moves involved
- how easily the users understand the information or procedure
- how well the users remember key information

Based on test results, researchers then develop **objective measures** of how different site designs and design elements affect website usability. It’s these objective yardsticks that form the basis of this book.

A Usable Website: Why is it Crucial?

For your website to be an effective business tool, people have to **visit** the site and **use** it. Not surprisingly, usability experts find that **the sites that get used are the sites that are usable.**

Studies show that for the overwhelming majority of web users, the decision to return to a site has very little to do with whether the site is fun to visit, or has attractive pictures or animations. In deciding whether to return to a site, **most users assess one thing: whether or not they can find good quality information, and find it quickly.** In other words, how usable the site is.

Usable sites get used.

True, not every customer who visits your site will be in the market for your product or service at the moment. But if your site is usable, then users are much more likely to return when they need your product or service.

Usable sites repay their investment. That's why you need one.

How to Use This Manual

First, skim the pages of this manual to get an overview of the issues.

As shown at right, each principle is ranked for two factors: importance, and the amount of work required to implement the principle. **Businesses with a limited amount of time and/or money** will get

Importance:	very high
Work Required:	medium

the most value for their dollar by concentrating on the tips that are ranked as high in importance but require a low-to-medium amount of work.

About a quarter of the principles are tagged as “High Payoff” items, meaning that these tips will give you the biggest usability payoffs for the effort. (When you’re improving an **existing** site, your gains will depend on how well or poorly that aspect of the site was designed to start with.)

H^{igh}
Payoff

Each new principle is placed at the top of a fresh page, making it easy to **skim horizontally** for an overview of the ideas. As you skim through the principles, explore the ones that seem important to you by reading the rationale and implementation information.

Next, go surfing on the web. Bookmark some sites that appeal to you, so you can show them to your designer. Once you’ve skimmed this manual, you should find it much easier to articulate what it is you like and dislike about particular sites. If you don’t have a web designer yet, this chapter gives you some tips for spotting a good one.

Be sure to also tell your designer about any features on other sites that you do not like—for example, prolonged animated introductions that you can’t skip. Features that annoy you will probably annoy others and should not be used on your site. You can also show your designer the pages in this book that you find important and discuss them.

Above all, make sure that you **communicate your likes and dislikes with your web designer before work is started on your site.** Never take a wait-and-see attitude, hoping that your designer will read your mind.

You will actually help your web designer by being specific about your likes and dislikes. The toughest thing for any designer to do is to work blind, without any hints as to what kind of final product you will find acceptable. So discuss what you want up front. Talk about content, color schemes, style and tone, whether you need a search tool, and so on.

Be open to your designer’s advice, but when all is said and done, stand firm about what you want and don’t want. It’s your site.

One last thing: remember that web design is a service business. As with any service, you’ll pay for what you get. Designers offering \$399 specials will most likely not be interested in spending too much time to implement the ideas in this book. That’s life.

Technical Topics, Checklists, and Disclaimers

One or two topics in this manual are discussions of purely technical behind-the-scenes design information. **They're included because they're vitally important for designing a usable site.**

These topics are clearly marked with a *Technical Topic* label, shown at right. The information is simplified as much as possible, but **if you find these topics outside your range of interest and/or understanding, don't worry.** Just show the page to your web designer and say "Did we do this?"

Technical
Topic

Also, on rare occasions, a very small amount of techno-speak has crept into the 'How' sections. This technical information is usually pulled out into a sidebar. Again, don't worry if you don't understand these few points. Just show the pages to your designer and you'll get the point across.

Summary Checklists

For your convenience, two checklists are included:

- **Appendix B** holds a summary checklist of the High Payoff tips
- **Appendix C** holds a complete checklist of all the tips in this book

Use either or both checklists to help you communicate with your web designer and get the results you want.

The Exception Proves the Rule

Just about every guideline in this book can be productively broken—in the right circumstances, by a designer who really knows the ropes. If you have a great designer, you may decide to trust his or her judgement and break a guideline or two. Nonetheless, in most cases breaking the guidelines will simply reduce the effectiveness of your site.

Remember, these principles are based on **studies of what web users really do and how they really react.**

Tips for Spotting a Good Web Designer

There are probably hundreds of web designers working in your area. Ability levels and site pricing will vary widely. Here are some tips to help you assess a designer's abilities before you plunk down the cash.

Track Record

Ask for the addresses of some sites the designer has built. Visit these sites. **Don't just look at them, actually USE them.** Are the navigation systems clear? Is the information well-organized and well-presented?

In the final analysis, it doesn't matter how pretty a website is if the information is jumbled or unclear. On a business website, cool web effects and graphics are the icing on the cake; the information IS the cake. **Above all, look for a designer who organizes information well.**

On each of the sample sites, look at how the **individual pages** are designed. Does the part of each page that you can see without scrolling give you a clear idea of what's on the page? If so, the designer knows how to work with the Inverted Pyramid information structure, which is the best structure for posting information on the web. (see *Prioritize Information with the Inverted Pyramid*, page 174).

Now evaluate how well the web designer actually writes. Studies show that **visitors to your website will assess your credibility based on the quality of the writing.** Many web designers have very little background in writing copy. If you like a designer's layouts but not the writing quality, consider bringing a professional writer on board.

Business Arrangements

A good designer will talk with you in detail about what you want before quoting you a price. **Ask for a firm quote, in writing.**

It is reasonable for the designer to ask you for a 50% deposit. In return, it is reasonable for you to ask for a **firm completion date, in writing.** Discuss what will happen if your designer does not meet the agreed-on deadline, and put that in writing too.

If a designer won't give you these considerations, consider looking elsewhere. **You don't need to be kept waiting indefinitely by someone who has made unrealistic promises.**

Collaboration and Opportunities for Your Input

Make it clear that you'll want to see the site 'look' and give feedback as the site is developed. Be wary of any designer that doesn't want you to view the developing pages. True, some designers may feel that showing you the intermediate steps hampers their creative muse, but... tough. It's your website. You're paying for it. Too many businesses have been surprised by sites they hate, then had to shell out extra cash to fix them. Work with someone who welcomes your input.

A Few Danger Signs

In general, be wary of any designer who:

- quotes a price without taking the time to determine what you want
- will not give a firm price, in writing, plus a summary of objectives to be reached and work to be done. (Some designers charge for this step, with the understanding that if you hire them, the fee is credited against your final bill.)
- will not give a firm delivery date for the site, in writing
- refuses to agree to let you see the developing site or have input into the design
- insists that using a frames-based design will not harm your site (see *Avoid Frameset-Based Designs*, page 60)
- insists that style sheets aren't necessary or that using them will take more time than not using them (see *Ask Your Designer to Use Style Sheets*, page 54)
- insists that a site designed totally in Flash is a good idea (see *Avoid All-Flash Sites*, page 63)

By following the above tips, you can help make sure that your company gets a designer who can give you a terrific, fully usable site.

What Your Quote Should Include

Your detailed quote should include all of the following items that apply to you:

- the number of pages to be developed and brief descriptions of the page topics
- descriptions of any forms or databases to be developed
- a list of the text/graphics/other materials to be supplied by you
- a list of the text/graphics/other materials (including animations, logos, video, etc.) to be created by the designer
- a short description of the technologies to be used or not used
- any agreed-on parameters for color schemes or site style/appearance
- information on what will be done to prepare the site for search engines
- search engine submission plan, if included in price
- price
- delivery date (and possibly a schedule of intermediate review dates)

One way to get a detailed quote is to give the designer a copy of this page and ask for a quote that addresses all the points.

It's a good idea to specifically ask if the quoted price is for a design based on framesets or all-Flash content (two of the main technological bugaboos; see Chapter 3 for more detail). If you don't want the limitations that these technologies involve, tell the designer that you want a site that does not use them, and ask for a re-quote if necessary.

A Note to Web Designers

This manual was written for business users, but it's a great resource for anyone who wants to design effective websites.

The manual explains usability issues in clear, non-technical language, starting with broad design issues and working down through successively finer layers of detail. **Because the information is written in plain English, you can use it to help explain your design choices (and their consequences) to your clients.**

Designers who want more information on how to implement the techniques in this manual will find Appendix D: *References and Resources*, very helpful.

Convention vs. Creativity???

“Following design conventions doesn’t destroy creativity. Conventions and standards for interface design are like a dictionary for the English language: they define the meaning of interface units and offer guidelines for stringing them together. But the dictionary doesn’t define whether you’re writing Harry Potter, a Stephen King thriller, or an Alertbox column... Interaction designers can be equally creative, despite a requirement that they design for the characteristics of *homo sapiens*.”

Jakob Nielsen
<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030908.html>

About E-Commerce

E-commerce site usability is a huge topic. Most of the principles in this manual apply to e-commerce sites. In some chapters, you’ll also find special e-commerce sections that add information specific to e-commerce.

For an in-depth exploration of usability and e-commerce, you may wish to invest in Jakob Nielsen’s study, *E-commerce User Experience: Design Guidelines for Selling Strategies*. (See Appendix D: *References and Resources*, for more information.)