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What Makes Great Web Design—A Basic Overview

BY PATRICIA PINSK

YOU DON'T NEED to know how to code to create a great site. You can use sites like Weebly, WordPress or Squarespace. They provide compliant templates (some are free) that you can easily create a clean, uncluttered and professional-looking site.

There are **three** important things to think about when it comes to content:

- **Readability** – is your site clear, and easy to understand?
- **Interoperability** – is it easy to use your site on all devices and platforms?
- **Accessibility** – can everyone see and access your site content to suit their needs?

Readability

As Jacob Nielsen points out in his article *How Long do Users Stay on Webpages?*, users spend less than a minute on a webpage. They spend less time if the content and layout is poor, and may not return to your site if it's frustrating to use.

Tests show that readers do the following when reading Web content:

- **Scan the content**—they don't read text thoroughly
- **Read only 18-20% of material** on a webpage
- **Spend approximately 4.4 seconds** per 100 words of text

To make content readable for the Web do the following:

- Keep your sentences short, and content concise.
- Use bulleted lists to “chunk” some content together.
- Use short headings with key words.
- Use consistent language throughout all your content.

Interoperability

Make it easy for people to use your site on any device and on any browser. **Test your site before you publish it.** Not everyone uses a desktop computer or a Windows operating system to view a site. So you need to ensure that what looks good and works in Firefox, also looks good and works in Safari.

Test your site on different devices such as a laptop and phone. Ask friends to test your site and get their opinion of what works and what doesn't. Test your site on different versions of a browser—not everyone upgrades to the latest version of Internet Explorer, for example.

To ensure your website works properly do the following:

- Test all links, menu items and widgets you use on your site.
- Ensure any visuals you use are optimized and “saved for web”. Small file sizes prevent your site from crashing, or loading slowly.
- Avoid using files that require users to download additional software to see content, for example a PDF reader. Most users are too lazy to

download something they don't already have on their system.

Accessibility

Most users have some sort of accessibility impairment. For some, they have difficulty reading light coloured print. You need to address physical impairments, mobility (e.g. can't use a mouse) and cognitive impairments (e.g. dyslexia) when creating content for your site. W3C details more on accessibility standards.

When creating content for a site, it is a requirement to make it accessible to all users. A fully accessible site not only invites more users to your site, it also puts you in a position of avoiding human rights lawsuits (for example, Target accessibility lawsuit).

To help make you site accessible, do the following:

- Use alternative text for all images.
- Provide transcripts for videos, podcasts, or detailed visuals.
- Use descriptive text in all links versus “click here”.
- Use appropriate headings in your content.
- Use plain language.

Good luck with your websites!

Patricia Pinsk lives in Vancouver. She holds a BFA from Vancouver's Emily Carr University of Art and Design, a Certificate in New Media from Vancouver Film School, and a Certificate in Technical Writing from Simon Fraser University.