

# Top Ten Web Design Mistakes

compliments of WOW Communications & Training Corp.

In 2005, the Nielsen-Norman Group, well known authorities on what makes a Web site usable ... or not, did a survey on what Web site characteristics people found most irritating, here are the results:

## 1. Legibility Problems

Bad fonts won the vote by a landslide, getting almost twice as many votes as the #2 mistake. About two-thirds of the voters complained about **small font sizes** or frozen font sizes; about one-third complained about **low contrast** between text and background.

## 2. Non-Standard Links

Links that aren't obvious by showing the underline clickable were the largest turn off, followed by no differentiating from visited and unvisited links. People did not like JavaScript or other fancy techniques that break standard interaction techniques for dealing with links. The only other pages that should be opened in another window are PDF Files.

## 3. Flash

Despite such good intentions, most of the Flash that Web users encounter each day is bad Flash with no purpose beyond annoying people. The one bright point is that splash screens and Flash intros are almost extinct. They are so bad that even the most clueless Web designers won't recommend them, even though a few (even more clueless) clients continue to request them.

Flash is a programming environment and should be used to offer users additional power and features that are unavailable from a static page. Flash should not be used to jazz up a page. If your content is boring, rewrite text to make it more compelling and hire a professional photographer to shoot better photos. Don't make your pages move. It doesn't increase users' attention, it drives them away; most people **equate animated content with useless content**.

Using Flash for navigation is almost as bad. People prefer predictable navigation and static menus.

## 4. Content That's Not Written for the Web

Writing for the Web means making content

- short,
- scannable, and
- to the point (rather than full of fluffy marketese).

Web content should also

- answer users' questions and
- use common language rather than made-up terms (this also improves search engine visibility, since users search using their own words, not yours).

## 5. Bad Search

Everything else on this list is pretty easy to get right, but unfortunately fixing search requires considerable work and an investment in better software. It's worth doing, though, because search is a fundamental component of the Web user experience and is getting more important every year.

## 6. Browser Incompatibility

Today, however, enough people use Firefox (and various other minority browsers, like Opera and Safari) that the business case is back: don't turn away customers just because they prefer a different platform.

## 7. Cumbersome Forms

- People complained about numerous form-related problems. The basic issue? **Forms are used too often** on the Web and tend to be **too big**, featuring too many unnecessary questions and options. Users are confronted by numerous forms and we must make each encounter as smooth as possible. There are five basic guidelines to this end:

## 8. No Contact Information or Other Company Info

Even though phone numbers and email addresses are the most requested forms of contact info, having a physical mailing address on the site might be more important because it's one of the key credibility markers. A company with no address is not one you want to give money to.

## 9. Frozen Layouts with Fixed Page Widths

Complaints here fell into two categories:

- On big monitors, websites are difficult to use if they don't resize with the window. Conversely, if users have a small window and a page doesn't use a liquid layout, it triggers insufferable horizontal scrolling.

- The rightmost part of a page is cut off when printing a frozen page. This is especially true for Europeans, who use narrower paper (A4) than Americans.

The very worst offenders are sites that freeze both the width and height of the viewport when displaying information in a pop-up window. Pop-ups are a mistake in their own right. If you must use them, don't force users to read in a tiny peephole. At an absolute minimum, let users resize any new windows.

## **10. Inadequate Photo Enlargement**

One of the long-standing guidelines for e-commerce usability is to offer users the ability to enlarge product photos for a close-up view. Seeing a tiny detail or assessing a texture can give shoppers the confidence they need to place an order online.

The worst mistake is when a user clicks the "enlarge photo" button and the site simply **displays the same photo**. It's always a mistake to offer **no-ops** that do nothing when clicked. Such do-nothing links and buttons add clutter, waste time, and increase user confusion: *What happened? Did I do something wrong?*