A Better Web for All!

By Peter Hubbard

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Part of the daily grind for me each morning is to sift through submissions to an online directory of South African websites. The idea is to make sure that all submissions are patently South African in origin, and free from undesirable content. It is tremendous fun if you happen to like that sort of thing, but unfortunately I don't.

South Africans seem to be creating websites that fall broadly into one of three categories: industrial suppliers, self-catering accommodation and website design. Common sense will thus dictate that one third of South Africa online is busy creating websites for the other two thirds. Certainly there is absolutely nothing whatsoever wrong with this at all, and heaven forfend that I should try to imply otherwise... but I just really wish that that one third of South Africa wasn't so mind-numbingly bad at what they do.

Now, now, it isn't quite as ghastly as all that. Good website design does exist down here, and if you have the patience you can go out find it for yourself. Stock up on Red Bull and nutritious energy bars before you try, though, as you could be in for a long ride. Also, make sure you know what bad website design *is* before you start. Oh, and disconnect that superfast xDSL modem as well - your search should be conducted entirely through dial-up. If you're really feeling masochistic, sign up with an ad-sponsored "free" Internet Service Provider, for the ultimate in lengthy downloads.

Finished? Did you find anything? Wonderful! Reconnect your xDSL modem, you deserve it.

Now try your search again - but this time the catch is that you can't use Internet Explorer. Mozilla (www.mozilla.org) is a good web browser - it's what Netscape's Navigator is built on - so give that one a try. Opera (www.opera.com) claims to be "Simply the Best Internet Experience" and very nearly makes good on this claim, as well as allowing you to quickly and easily turn off graphics and stylesheets. Drop your desktop resolution down to 800x600 pixels and off you go.

Find anything this time? All right - here's the acid test: get a text-to-speech converter and do your browsing blindfolded.

Find anything? I didn't either!

Good web design isn't just about avoiding flashing animated gifs all over the place, and it isn't just about making sure that everything is nicely positioned, or that the text isn't pink and six-point in size on a bright green background. Good web design isn't just about looks - it's about accessibility. Bad web design is lurking at the bottom of pages, hidden in that innocent little message that reads "This site best viewed in Internet Explorer at 1024x768 resolution". The very worst web design simply assumes that you're using Internet Explorer at 1024x768, and the utterly atrocious web design that I get to see so much of *also* assumes that you can browse the internet as fast as the web designers can access their hard drives.

Amazingly, marketers and designers far too often don't care about people whose viewing experience of their webpages is going to be less than perfect. As long as 90% of the online community is happy, they are happy - and even I have to admit that 90% is a pretty decent score.

It's a short-sighted outlook though, as that 90% is shrinking every day as the playing fields level out. People are becoming accustomed to seeking out quality over convenience. That dreaded entity Linux is getting more and more popular, and design houses in South Africa are starting to wake up to the fact the best computer for multimedia is a Macintosh. Sure, Mac users have a version of Internet Explorer available to them, but ask them straight out and they will tell you that the only reason they use it is to make sure that the Windows boys and girls can see their webpages properly.

Bad wed design means that some people can't see your webpages properly. The very worst web design doesn't even care if some people can't see your webpages properly. Oh, and the utterly atrocious web design is only ever going to be seen by people like me (who *have* to look at it) because everyone else has gotten bored and browsed somewhere else while waiting for the homepage to load. That's *customers* you're losing there!

The point of the Internet is that it should be fully accessible by everyone, not just a segment of the market. You don't have to have a specially outfitted pair of hands to read a magazine; and neither do you need different sets of eyeballs to watch different television programmes, so why should the World Wide Web be any different? Your web site may look pretty on your setup, but with a bit of extra work it can also be fast and accessible *and* look pretty on everybody else's setup.

And the sad truth is that, whatever browsers South Africans may be using, most of us surf the web at the eye-watering pace of 3kb per second - or less. And until broadband internet access becomes very much cheaper, that's the way things are going to stay.

It gets better (or worse, depending on your outlook!) - if international trends are anything to go by, state-run websites will in future be required to be one hundred per cent accessible by the blind and partially sighted (see why I asked you to try out that text-to-speech converter?). Consider that next time you think of creating an entire site in Flash...

Quick, generic, pretty - listed here in descending order of importance - that's all you have to remember for good website design. Simple, isn't it?

Oh - you'll have to excuse me, I'm afraid: that five hundred kilobyte intro has finally downloaded. I shall have to return to work now...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Hubbard is a programmer by trade who was forced to pick up Dreamweaver and Photoshop one day and hasn't looked back since. He works for an ISP in Centurion, and confidently expects the release of his all-singing, all-dancing homepage (also browsable on iPaqs) Real Soon Now. He can be contacted at peterhjr@yahoo.co.uk.

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