

Michael Siebenaler

Dr. Andrew Mara

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Technical Issue Paper
The Effect of Website templates on Web Design:
Balancing Content and Layout

Recent discussions with BGSU staff and students about uniform Website templates prompted the choice of this technical issue paper. One universal template where everyone would just plug in their content, icons and other elements may be hard to achieve due to issues like user requirements, site profile and other limitations imposed on the content provider to work within the available options (most Website templates don't have all the options a Microsoft Word program would have). Current trends at BGSU and the overall Web design field have strayed from graphic-heavy stress on visuals to more content-focused Websites that focus on simplicity. Another trends such as liquid design--adapting available space on the computer screen, similar to the way liquid fits into any container, to reduce space limitations and improve the overall Website.

This paper investigates the pros and cons of Website templates in detail, so that editors will have some background into this current issue before they encounter it. Editors can then approach this issue with some guidance to make well-informed decisions stressing collaboration with Web Designers, managers and other project personnel.

Pros

1. Better Navigation/Uniformity
2. Host/User Benefits
3. Maintenance
4. Price
5. Time Frame

Cons

1. Not Unique Enough
2. Contributor Writing/Editing Weaknesses
3. Lack of Style Sheets
4. Diminishes Web Designers' job
5. Copyright Ownership Issues

Pro 1 - Better Navigation/Uniformity

Website users typically scan and skim to quickly find what they need. Website producers and hosts also want to quickly to find what they need, namely, the page they need to update or reorganize. In personnel communications with Jamie Boucher, Marketing/Communications Manager at Noneman Real Estate Company and former Web Designer at the Lauerer Markin Group, Inc., she shares her template experience with navigation and uniformity. "I have often found working with template web sites that they are hard to manipulate if you want to make any changes (design wise). It is nice to have uniformity, but it can also be boring, yet you can still have uniformity by not using a template. Template web sites are easy to pick out too. Would you really want your site to look like so many others on the web? I think in today's age you need to position yourself differently from other web sites or competitors on the web. Uniquely made web site is the better choice. You have more latitude to make changes, add new pages/content, etc. (personnel communications, 22 Sept. 2003)." I agree with Jamie about uniformity causing boredom. I would only recommend templates for internal company Web site information because everyone has to be on the same page. In a commercial or commerce Web site, you don't know your audience so you must have a very flexible template.

Current changes in the BGSU Website, www.bgsu.edu, attempt to create a uniform Website that would make BGSU on-line content recognizable to all audiences, but the main BGSU audience may not always understand this reasoning. “We can’t do anything creative anymore. It’s repressing. All work has to fit in the parameters set up by the Web site producers,” said one anonymous BGSU student. Fred Connor, BGSU Marketing Manager, explains main reasoning behind the Website template change--uniformity. “Previous Websites were creative but often emitted links to the BGSU Website, so we reversed the situation around, taking more control of shaping BGSU public relations, communication and overall image (personnel communication, 25 Sep. 2003).” The transition of the BGSU Website might have been easier through increased collaboration. “Synchrony of meaning and expression is the future of web design (Stein, Bob).” Just because we can make cool graphics and transitions, doesn’t mean a user will understand what to do with them. Editors must help keep communication flowing so the documentation and overall Website stays strong while concentrating on comprehension techniques (chunking, etc.) that will simplify a Website.

Pro 2 – Host/User Benefits

“Web pages are all created with a purpose in mind by some person or agency or entity. They do not simply "grow" on the web like mildew grows in moist corners...The web is a public place, open to all. You need to be aware of the entire range of human possibilities of intentions behind web pages (Barker & Obromsook).” Website templates can provide more control for the Website host and more accessibility for the user. The host claims most of the responsibility while the user mainly provides content, but learns a lot about building a Website in the process. “Whether surfers are researching a specific topic or casually wandering, if a Web page doesn't click with them at first glance, they might not stay long. That's why the goal of any business or

organization launching or redesigning its Web site should be to communicate its message quickly and clearly to the user (Back & Geddes).” Hosts can provide Websites available 24 hours a day, an ideal availability that fits the sporadic schedule of a BGSU college student. Hosts should always be aware of the user’s capabilities and coordinate with managers and personnel who build computer networks; otherwise they won’t be able to deliver information to users; wasting the production time of the content providers and editors.

Pro 3 - Maintenance

“Vital to good web design is architecting data so the site is usable and maintainable (Stein).” One Website template simplifies the host’s duties including archives information and daily organizing operations. Editors may not have much of a direct role here, but should emphasize simple organization and recording tasks involving large volumes of documentation. Some Web designers believe a library of information suffices for most of their audience. If it’s on the Web, it’s relevant – just not very usable. Strong Web design must concentrate on writing, editing, organization and navigation structures.

Pro 4 - Price

“I don't think there is a designer out there who hasn't heard or danced around the word budget. Everybody's got one (Schumacher).” Website templates might eliminate the need to hire a web designer. “You [should] to look at your need for a web site. If you just need a web site because everybody else has one, then great a template would be good for you. But if you need a web site to strategically market your company I truly believe you need to have something unique (Boucher, Jamie, personnel communication, 22 Sep. 2003).” Editors can estimate their budget by quantifying the content in comparable Web sites. This time-consuming approach would not be ideal for Websites with large volumes of documentation, but would provide an accurate

estimation for work on a small business Web site. Layout and graphical consideration remain important, but usually lag behind content in priority.

Pro 5 – Time Frame

“You sacrifice personal time to create an awe-inspiring layout (Schumacher).” It might take some people several days to produce a quality web template. “Template web sites are great if you want to get on the web fast. It really is not hard to create your own web site. I could probably design a web site in two days. You have to research who is doing your web site and how experienced they are (Boucher, Jamie, personnel communication, 22 Sep. 2003).”

BGSU Web site hosts might meet certain criteria, but frustrated Web site users (like the previously mentioned BGSU student) feel that the hierarchy has taken away their purpose – a deeply emotional issue that goes beyond the mechanics of content quality. Why should they care about usability or format, if the upper hierarchy takes away controls once owned by the lower hierarchy? So the upper hierarchy can keep their ideology in place and justify their action with words like “uniformity” and “college identity.” The following points explain why Website templates don’t have all the answers.

Con 1 – Not Unique Enough

It’s bad to look like everyone else, you want to stand out. Content providers, editors and designers must collaborate to achieve layout with graphics that will entice users while providing them with quality content. “If our work is going to develop and get better, we need to spend more time sharing ideas and collaborating with designers whose practices may be quite different from our own (Jacobson).”

Con 2 – Contributor Writing/Editing Weaknesses

Some contributors are not strong content writers, but they have many resources

including this outline (see appendix) from an HTML Writer's Workshop (Writer's Workshop Description). "Personal pages are not necessarily "bad," but you need to investigate the author very carefully. For personal pages, there is no publisher or domain owner vouching for the information in the page (Barker & Obromsook)." Editors must evaluate the contributing writer's level of expertise (Ph.D., etc.) and ascertain how much the writer knows about the topic. Are they affiliated with certain organizations? Do they have a recognizable bias in the writing and the terms they use? Editors should only add missing/omitted content after a careful evaluation of the contributing writer's motives. I would suspect any company that didn't have an objective editor view the content before publishing it to the Website.

Con 3 - Lack of Style Sheets

"As soon as a style becomes universally supported, the need to separate it from content disappears (Stein)". Styles might be universally supported in certain disciplines (e.g. AP in public relations/marketing) and companies, but would never be universally supported by everyone. Style sheets describing these various, dynamic styles become invaluable resources for editors and content providers producing Web documentation. The BGSU Website provides a good example. Content coming from a university would establish credibility, but if the hosts don't provide criteria for content writers, the content could damage this credibility. Users can get quickly frustrated if content providers don't know about important styles choices and graphic considerations such as subtitles, keywords, bolding and bulleted items. "You also need to have enough information throughout your web site that pertains to your site so that it will be picked up on search engines (Boucher, Jamie, personnel communication, 22 Sep. 2003). Search engine submissions require tactful writing and editing that involves word proximity, frequency and

relevancy. If you don't familiarize yourself with these criteria, then the content you worked so hard to shape may not reach a large audience.

Con 4 - Diminishes Web Designers' job

More work for editors and content providers, but less work for Web designers due to diminished graphics and layout concerns. Editors [should] have a few things to keep in mind when approaching a Website template project like simplifying vocabulary, delivering work under the project budget (Schumacher). "But figuring out how to translate a corporate or institutional idea into Web language can be tricky. That's where the Web designer comes in. Unless your company is large enough to have a team of in-house designers creating and maintaining its Web presence, you will probably need to pick a design firm to handle the work (Back & Geddes)." Editors may not have direct responsibility in maintaining a Website, but should be a voice when a project team considers eliminating Web designers from the equation. "Many organizations make the mistake of handing all Web development -- from content creation to regular maintenance -- to an outside consultant or to only one staff member - an inefficient and costly way to handle your Web activities (Back & Geddes)." Web designers have special training and knowledge of Web applications that administrators and editors do not have.

Con 5 - Copyright Ownership Issues

Website template sharing and dissemination can produce some ownership issues and legal ethics that Web designers, writers and editors have to address. Seek available legal advice whenever needed when encountering questionable projects. If the Website host doesn't have a legal resource, you may have to research policies and laws regarding data protection on your own (watch out freelancers). Anyone involved in a project that breaks copyright ownership laws can be liable which hurts credibility with clients and can ruin a professional career.

Conclusion

Website templates strive to provide the ideal union of graphics and text. Graphic-only Websites could improve communication in certain areas, but some users' computers sometimes can't handle the graphics involved. The audience won't be able to understand much, if the computer can't produce the needed visuals. Text-only Websites void of all graphics including backgrounds, colors and logos might make the content usable, but doesn't distinguish the Website from others and could diminish an average visitor's interest quickly. For example, before the change, the host/marketing department distributes a press release/FAQ sheet explaining their reasoning to users, namely students and faculty who then voice their opinions and recommendation before the Website template appears). So how will Website templates work best? First, understand your audience, and then provide quality content while preserving visual attractiveness and a visually balanced layout. Website templates have a great impact on editing because more stress on content requires more detailed work. Editors, Web designers and other personnel must all be aware of project time, quality and cost and compromise in their collaboration. Web designers must keep the Website attractive while focusing on accessibility and the audience, namely the users. Editors and content providers must write content that draws an audience to the Website and keeps them at the Website. Structured feedbacks, from audiences outside the company producing the template, would greatly benefit both parties, so informed adjustments to programs like BGSU's Blackboard® could be made. "What I think working web designers need is visibility into the technology they're trying to use and into the experience they're creating for their users. Combine that with a thorough grasp of mission, and an inclination to complete the job, and they'll decide wisely what needs to go where...I don't think anyone is served by oversimplifying it (Stein)."