

Got A Second? – Barely!

Grabbing a website visitor's attention

By: Angela Nielsen – President/Creative Director



The blink of an eye! That's how long it takes a visitor to assess the overall look of your website. Research has recently shown that a site visitor will decide whether or not they like your website in 1/20th of a second. That's less than the time it takes to blink! And in less than 10 seconds they decide to stay at your website or leave!

The report, published in the latest issue of *Behaviour and Information Technology* journal, claims that "if the first impression is negative, you'll probably drive people off. It really is just a physiological response," Gitte Lindgaard told Reuters. What the report does not conclude, is what actually makes a successful, aesthetically pleasing website, but only how much time it would take for a visitor to make that decision.

In the 6 years we have been developing websites, we have had the ability to test many different styles and looks of websites. We have also studied successful sites, to find out what the secret really is. What we found out is astonishing. Ready?

There is no secret! That's right, there is no single, right way to build a website. There are however many "wrong" ways to avoid.

The real secret of a good website, is to eliminate anything that drives your visitors away. And how does one do this you ask? By understanding your target market. That's the real trick in designing a website that is successful, and more importantly a home page that will retain your visitors.

Too many times new website owners think they need every bell and whistle available. They tend to pack their home page with too many components that are simply "eye-candy" and have no real value to the viewer. Others strip their site down and all you see is miles and miles of content, and no appealing graphics to get excited about.

What is needed is a site with the right balance of graphics and content. By "right", we mean whatever is most pleasing to your target audience. If you are trying to attract elementary school children, then having a bunch of flashy images, bright colors, and huge fonts would more than likely pull them in. However, if you are attracting Fortune 500 companies those strategies would be a sure turn off.

I like to think of a website as a house. Take your house for example. You probably have a nicely colored front door, and possibly a wreath or other decoration (even just a fancy door knocker) hanging on that door. Chances are you have some sort of welcome mat that you spent time picking out just to give your visitor's a welcoming place to wipe their feet. You keep the area around your front door clean and tidy. Your front door is welcoming and warm, making your visitors feel like they want to come in, that they want to see more.

In the same way, your home page is the front door to your website. This is the page that you should spend the most time constructing, because if visitors don't move beyond it then the other pages won't matter! You want this page to be eye-catching (but not overwhelming), easy to navigate (but not boring), and have the right amount of content to grab the attention of your visitor.

Let's start with the visual appeal of your home page.

First and foremost you should have a professionally designed logo. Your company name displayed in plain Arial text just won't cut it for most of your visitors. A nicely designed logo is the first part of establishing credibility with your visitor, and as such should be shown prominently at the top of your website.

Along with a memorable logo, your website should incorporate colors that your audience will respond to. For an explanation on selecting colors, please see our "Color Theory" article at http://www.nicmedia.com/color_theory.htm.

Graphic images are also important to help the viewer relate to your website. Professional photographs can easily accomplish this and still be affordable. There are numerous stock photography houses that provide high resolution images for very affordable prices, or you can hire your own photographer for custom work.

When using images of people, keep it down to earth. Research indicates that while viewers like to see attractive people in their own age group, they should not necessarily be identifiable as models. It's more important that the images portray someone relatable that looks like them or "real" in their eyes rather than made up.

Your home page should be organized so that visitors quickly understand what they can accomplish. The typical website has logo on top (in a banner sometimes called a masthead), along with navigation either horizontally across top or vertically along the left hand side. Yes, this may seem old and boring, but it's what visitors have come to expect and rely on. When that gets changed too much they don't feel comfortable and tend to back away.

Navigation is the key to the flow of your website. Your navigation should have links that can be easily identified. Home, About Us, Our Products, Our Services, Contact Us – yes those are names we've seen a hundred times and we think we'd like to fluff that up – but don't forget that is what your visitor is looking for. Remember, newspapers are written on an 8th grade level in order for the majority of its readers to be able to read and understand, and that same principal should apply to your navigation and entire website.

Make sure that your navigation flow makes sense for your viewer, ordering your pages with the most important pages listed first followed by the lesser important or least likely to be viewed pages. This helps assure you get your audience to the meat of your website quickly. To avoid confusion, consistency is key, so whatever navigation you use on your home page should be carried on throughout the remainder of your website.

Last but not least, is content. Content has to be rich and exciting enough to draw your visitor in, and short enough to grab their attention! Research suggests that the average reader can read approximately forty words in ten seconds.

The paragraph above is exactly 40 words. If you only have 10 seconds to pull your viewer in, that's roughly the amount of content they can take in during that amount of time.

People tend to scan websites rather than read them entirely, so adjust to this fact. Use eye-catching headlines, bolding, bullet points, anything to break up the monotony of a plain paragraph and draw attention to the stuff that is most relevant for them to see. Plenty of white space helps to pull the reader's eye along through the content of the page. Faced with a large block of text, our eyes tend to skip past it.

In short, you really have no choice but to make your website's homepage an attention-grabber. Let your visitor know right away they are in the right place, that you have THE answer to their problem, that your company is credible, and that your site is easy to navigate.

Once they find the basic components that are expected they will be drawn in to more of your content and navigate deeper into your website. That's the foundation for a solid call to action so your website achieves it's goal. Remember, you only have a second!

About the Author: Angela Nielsen is President of One Lily Inc., an award-winning web development company located in southern California. To find out more about Angela Nielsen or One Lily visit www.onelily.com. Copyright by Angela Nielsen, All Rights Reserved.