

Web Design and SEO: The Eternal Debate

Web design focuses on appearance and aesthetics. SEO focuses on text quality and quantity. Web designers don't really like to clutter their designs with text. They prefer to see the images stand out on their own. SEOs on the other hand don't like images that much. Sure, an image can be optimized for the search engines by adding relevant alt attributes and titles, but this is not enough for a site to be properly optimized. Page copy still plays the most important role in website optimization for SEO.

As a business owner you are caught in the middle of this conflict. For your website to convert you need both design and optimization. There is no middle way. You cannot have a little bit of this and a little bit of that and still be competitive. You cannot have just one of the two either. Without optimization your site is invisible to the search engines, hence to your potential customers. On the other hand, without a good design your site, although not invisible, will get nothing but hits. Web users are picky and if they find nothing of interest on your site they will just surf to the next site.

Having a beautiful website no one can find is like having a store and keeping the doors locked. You know it is there, you've done a great job decorating it, the products are waiting for the customers, yet no one comes in.

When you pay for web design don't automatically assume that by paying thousands of dollars on a layout you'll be a hit on the Web. The Web is a highly competitive place. There are already thousands entrepreneurs who, just like you, invest in design and hope to become the new "it." Without online marketing (SEO being an important part of the discipline) all these entrepreneurs will remain in the shadow, with their beautiful websites closed to the world.

SEO is the key to that virtual door you need to open for your customers. It is important that you consider this tool when you first conceive your site. Web design and SEO don't need to be enemies. There are enough professional agencies that employ both web designers and SEOs who work together to develop a good business website, a site that is SEO ready, accessible and readable with any browser. You just need to take your time, research and send a few inquiries. Then choose the company that answers your questions in a timely manner, basically choose the company that proves a clear ability of designing with W3C standards and a clear understanding of the online trends and realities.

Then balancing content with visual appearance shouldn't be such a difficult task. Aside from graphics and artwork you have to choose proper font types, in a readable size, with colors that harmonize with the layout of the site and so on. If your site is not SEO ready from the first stage of the project you'll face additional costs after you launch. SEO ready means a site that is properly coded (errors in the HTML code might stop some search bots from crawling and indexing your site correctly), with good navigability and good internal linking structure.

On the other hand, SEO and appearance are not the only traits of a good site. Brand conscious companies should look at the broader picture: instead of debating what is better, online entrepreneurs should ask themselves what works best to convert visitors into clients.

Studies show that an over optimized page might hurt the user-experience of people with disabilities. For example, many SEOs stuff the image alt attributes and their alternative titles with keywords. Blind and other visually impaired people who use screen readers to access the Web and read the pages cannot see the images and, instead of listening to a relevant image description, they'll hear... nonsense.

Usability and accessibility are equally important as design and optimization. Strangely enough images are better for usability. They give focus to the design and when properly optimized they provide for less cluttered website content. The problems appear when the images slow down the loading times, but with the use of CSS loading times should not be a big concern.

As search engines prefer fast loading sites it is easy to understand why good coding and optimization are so important. Poor coding raises many other problems aside from loading times and might increase costs when you need website updates, especially when your website administrator is not the one who created your site.

About the Author:

Mihaela Lica used to be a military journalist, worked six years as a freelance reporter for the Romanian National Radio Station (ROR) and four years in the Public Relations Directorate of the Romanian Ministry of Defense. Since 2002 she is a PR consultant in Germany.