

Poor design means terrible websites still haunt the web

January 21 2014, by David Tuffley



Website design shouldn't elicit this reaction. Flickr/Mylla

There is probably not one of us reading this who has not lost themselves in time and space as they surf the web. So much engaging content, so many interesting lines of enquiry – and so much rubbish too.

As the (revised) saying goes:

Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach that person to use the internet and they won't bother you for weeks.

Even though the World Wide Web has come a [long way](#) since it was [first](#)

[developed](#) more than 20 years ago, we often come across the "try-too-hard website" where designers mistakenly think that people visit the site for the "experience". They do not. They come for information. Anything that slows them down in getting that information is just annoying.

Annoying your visitors can hardly be good for business, yet websites that do this are not uncommon – as shown in the latest annual list of [25 worst websites](#).

Even worse is the website for a [James Bond museum](#) in Sweden, picked up by another [web critic](#).

A 'jarring' design on the James Bond Museum website.
www.007museum.com

Despite a growing number of people accessing the [web through their smartphones](#), there are still many websites that have so much busy content, Flash animations and slow-loading graphics that even a desktop computer would have trouble showing them.

No standards of design

Of course there are no enforceable standards for how websites should look, only [technical standards](#) for how they operate under the skin.

Accessing the web on a smartphone. Flickr/Mads Madsfoto Johansen

Website designers do what they think will work best in the interests of whoever is paying them.

This might include some downright awful [razzle-dazzle](#) websites. It might even include the covert installation of malware ([malicious software](#)).

The internet can indeed be a dangerous and dirty place, as the late author Kurt Vonnegut laconically observed back in 2005 during an [interview](#) with the ABC's Phillip Adams.

"(it has) allowed white-collar criminals to do what the mob would have loved to do – put a porn shop and a loan shark in every home."

When it comes to web design, people do what they think they can get away with.

Bad design

Opinions vary about what good and bad web design looks like, but there are a few points that many seem to agree on. These include:

1. not being mobile-friendly
2. overuse of Flash animations
3. pop-up windows
4. music or video that plays automatically
5. too much content, particularly when poorly organised
6. inappropriate typography
7. slow to load
8. installation of [adware](#) or [malware](#)
9. too many ads
10. poor visual contrast
11. poor navigation aids
12. irrelevant or self-indulgent content and overuse of stock photos.

The list is not exhaustive, but covers the majority of people's gripes with websites.



A ‘jarring’ design on the James Bond Museum website at www.007museum.com.

Good design

Describing bad design begs the question, what is good design? Much orthodox opinion parading as fact has been written on the subject, but let us cut straight to the essence.

Look to the basics for good design. Flickr/ Mariano Real Pérez

One of the great designers of the modern era, German industrial designer [Dieter Rams](#), distilled a lifetime of first-class work into ten basic principles of good design.

It is true that Rams designed [physical objects](#) rather than websites, but his human-centred design principles capture the essence so well that a good argument can be made for applying them to web design, along with any other artifacts.

Here are Rams' ten principles as I would see them applied to web design.

1. **Innovative** – it avoids cliches and tired methods and makes use of current technologies to achieve innovative user interfaces and functionality.
2. **Usefulness/usability** – the user has no difficulty finding what they are looking for, the content is concise, high quality and accurate, and the website is usable by the various browsers and search engines etc that interact with it.
3. **Aesthetic** – there is a harmonious balance between form and function. The arrangement of colours, spacings and typefaces all work in harmony with each other to make the user feel good when using it.
4. **Easy to understand** – the site is self-explanatory and intuitive. The design is fully aligned to the goals of the website.
5. **Unobtrusive** – the "less is more" principle. Simple and minimalist to the point where *only* that which is essential is present, nothing more. The user reaches the information they want quickly. They do not get lost or diverted along the way.
6. **Honest** – the website is open and upfront about what is happening. It gives users all of the options they need when they need it so they understand. The design does not get in the way of giving the user what they want.
7. **Longevity** – the website remains good and usable over time, not by staying the same but by evolving and staying current. This applies to both content and site layout.
8. **Thorough** – nothing has been left out, everything is there that needs to be there.
9. **Environmentally friendly** – the website is as efficient as it can be by reducing the amount of data that needs to be downloaded, images that have been optimised for the web and so on. It is true that this will have a negligible effect on the environment, but the principle of lean efficiency is nonetheless important.
10. **As little design as possible** – "less but better". The website has only what is essential and is not burdened with non-essentials. It

has the virtue of simplicity.

Some would argue that these principles might have been relevant in the Cold War era but has little to do with good [web design](#) today.

That would be to miss the point that the principles of good design will always be true and can be adapted across all disciplines. Enough from me: let Rams and Apple's senior vice president of design [Jonathan Ive](#) explain their ideas in their own words.

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