

CHAPTER THREE

Your Homepage Is a 30-Second Window of Opportunity: Don't Be Shy!

Channel surfing is an art on the World Wide Web. Users move from one site to the next at what seems like the speed of sound, barely waiting for a homepage to load before deciding whether it's really a place they want to hang around and explore. If they don't see what they're looking for on the homepage (or at any rate how to get to what they want), they won't stick around looking for long. The key to developing a successful homepage is to discover and use messages, words, features, and images that will capture the attention and interest of your audience. In this chapter, you will explore some of the insights we have learned from user experience testing regarding how to make the homepage as intuitive and "friendly" a space as possible.

Show Them What You Have to Offer

One of the biggest challenges of conducting business on the web is establishing a presence for a product or service for which there is no precedent. If people have no conceptual model for what a site provides, this challenge is all the greater: Users need to be educated about what is being offered. More importantly, they still need to be sold on the products and services. In other words, developers must be certain that what they are selling is clear and compelling to users, given the limited real estate on the homepage and the even more limited “window” you have to get their attention.

On this matter, we believe that the following insight speaks for itself. A new site offered consumers the ability to send email and greeting cards with video clips included. In order to do this, the user was required to use a web cam to record her video (of, say, a family portrait, new dog, or college reunion), and then she had to download software from the company’s site that would permit the video to be included in the email or electronic card. These clips could thereafter be stored on the company’s site for future use.

So far, so good. However, when testing the first version of the site, we learned that most people (including the technologically sophisticated) didn’t know what a web cam was, much less what one might cost or how to obtain and install one. Also, many weren’t sure what the benefit of this service was, or for what occasions they would use it. Most damning, the instructions for sending a video email or card weren’t at all clear to prospective users. Indeed, most weren’t even aware that they were first required to download a piece of software before using the service.

Through user experience testing for this client, we also learned that the largely text-based homepage did not excite people about the possible outcome of using the site. That is, users did not, by and large, share the developer’s enthusiasm for being able to send user-friendly video emails and cards with videos.

Based on consumer input obtained through our testing, the company took the following steps to make their homepage work for them:

- They displayed the image of a web cam and a direct path users could follow to purchase one at a discount without leaving the site (which was especially important for those that didn't own such equipment but wanted to use the service).
- They created a visual flow chart that employed graphics to show how the site could be used to send a video card or email.
- Finally, they placed photos on the homepage that illustrated the emotional benefits that could result from using the service—namely, the satisfaction of sharing videos of family reunions, the birth of children, college graduations, and so on with friends and family.

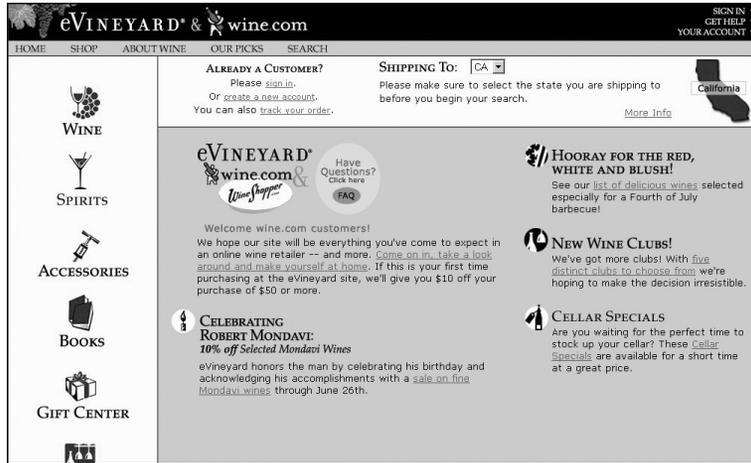
Similarly, we worked with a healthcare site that was introducing a radically new healthcare solution for consumers. On many levels, this solution parted ways from traditional managed care. Initially, user experience testing suggested that consumers simply didn't understand what the site was about. The final solution to this problem was to redesign the homepage so that it began with a brief explanation of how and why consumers would benefit from using this service versus managed care.

The main lesson we learned through these examples is that the key to effectively introduce a product or service that no one has ever heard of or used is to take responsibility for educating people about the service. In this “take no prisoners” approach, users must be made aware of both what they stand to gain by using a given web service or purchasing a product online, *and* what they stand to lose by failing to do so. We offer the following simple guidelines on how to effectively bring this about:

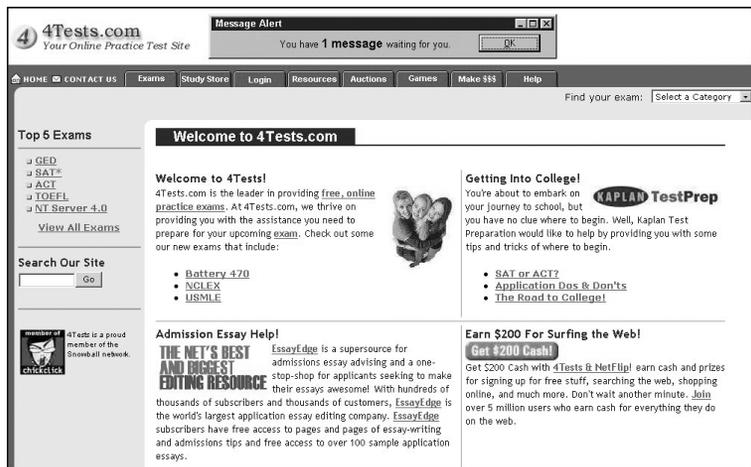
- Don't try to tell people everything they need to know about the service—certainly not on the homepage. Give them just enough to let them know what's in it for them and what they might miss out on by not acting on the opportunity.

Figure 3.1
(Next two images)

The homepages for the relatively unknown eVineyard.com and 4Tests.com enthusiastically greet the customer with the benefits of the site.



www.eVineyard.com



www.4Tests.com

- Provide a direct link to get more information—for those who want to “know it all.”
- Provide a link to a demo that walks the user through a real life transaction.
- Use graphics and photos wherever possible, either to describe the process in *simple* terms or to illustrate what people stand to gain by using the service or product (for example, happy grandparents and excellent healthcare at a reduced price).

Strut Your Credentials, Particularly Where They Matter

In some cases (for instance, the purchase of commodity items such as books or branded shampoos), many consumers will be unfamiliar with a particular dot-com. For this reason, it is critical for users to have a sense that the prices and rates are fair and the site is legitimate. The web can be a scary place for the faint-of-heart, and users need to know they are not being taken to the cleaners by one of the many fly-by-night operations that prey on Internet newbies and the generally unwary.

When the web sites in question pertain to industries such as health-care, education, or financial services, the importance of credentials increases exponentially. In fact, strong credentials are often the make-or-break point for consumers considering whether to use such weighty services or purchase products from these sites. It is critical to getting users to put their faith and their dollars in you. This holds true whether you're speaking of consumers making "high ticket" purchases (such as cars, furniture, and antiques) or of the many businesses for whom the "cost of doing business" entails the purchase of costly goods and services from other businesses.

Consider the following examples. When Fleet, a major bank in New England, was about to launch web banking, testing showed that consumers clearly wanted the site to look just like the bank branch. They rejected a new logo in favor of the one already employed on signage, letterhead, and so on. Moreover, most of those tested wanted their account information to look just like their statements and expected the site to be a visually obvious extension of the bank: In every sense, its online shadow and not, as one consumer put it, "something a twelve-year-old in Wisconsin had created in his basement." The bank took these recommendations seriously, and consequently, at launch, the site was a mirror image of the bank and was as easy to use as the bank's ATM. Thereafter, usage far exceeded projections.

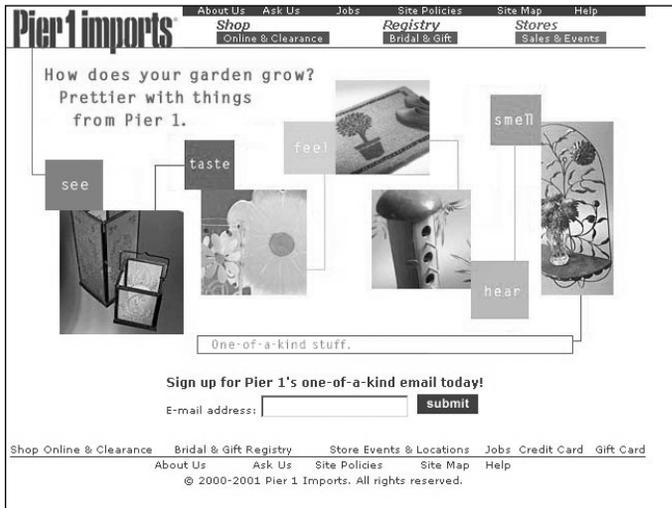
In another case, the first version of a homepage for a site that sold children's educational books and software made no mention of who or what was behind the site. Users thought anybody could be

Figure 3.2
(Next two images)

As with its famous bricks and mortar counterpart, the homepage of McDonald's greets visitors with the familiar yellow arches and striking red background—in other words, exactly what they expect to see. Likewise, Pier 1's site mirrors the look and feel of their stores.



www.mcdonalds.com



www.pier1.com

behind it, and consequently they simply viewed the site as a specialized e-commerce site. This was a missed opportunity insofar as the company in question (unlike competitors) carefully selected and sold products based on strong ratings given them by both top-notch educators and parents. For the second version of the homepage, the proud trumpeting of these credentials front-and-center on the homepage was extremely comforting and appealing to parents, who thought these credentials added much value to the site.

Finally, when we tested a prototype of a site for trading metal, we found that the first thing target users wanted to know was “who was behind the site.” When they learned that the site was developed by significant people in the industry, their interest in using the site increased substantially. As a result, the company placed “About Us” as the first item on the homepage.

As these examples make plain, in cases where users need to really trust a site in order to enter the “front door,” companies need to make the most of their credentials by making them prominent features of their homepages.

Don't Have Credentials? Beg and Borrow (But Don't Steal) 'Em!

So far, we have established that credentials are important. But the question of how companies set about actually establishing their credentials online is an entirely different matter. How is this to be done?

In many cases, the best way to obtain credibility when it is needed is to “borrow it” by featuring well-known brands or brand affiliations on a homepage. Borrowing is an effective technique because it enhances the user experience by generating a sense that, although the site and its parent company may not themselves be known to consumers, they are “known” through association with more familiar and trusted companies. This is made still more effective when a given company’s affiliations (such as the parent company, key clients, or partnerships) are also prominently displayed on the homepage.

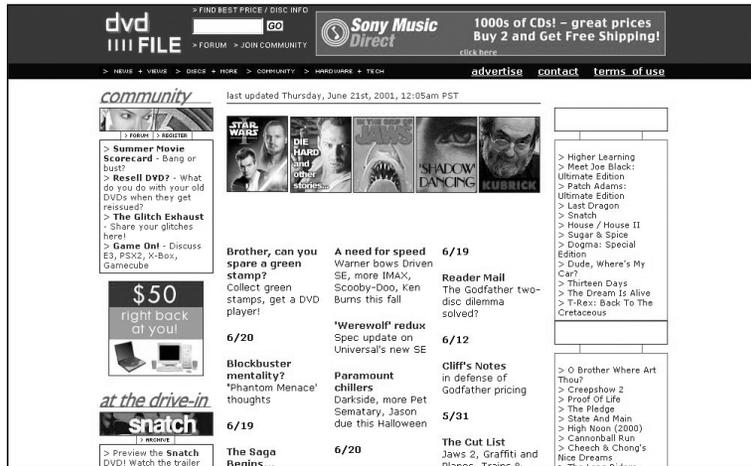
Of course, the significance and need for credentials will vary from web site to web site, and established companies will generally have less need to borrow. Nevertheless, even established companies might want to emphasize their bricks-and-mortar presence on the homepage. Doing so “cements” (so to speak) their enduring character in the minds of consumers and suggests that they have established customer service policies and will honor their commitments. If a company’s offline presence is prestigious (for example,

Figure 3.3
(Next two images)

eBay is one of many sites that features prominent brand names and logos on its home page. DVDFile effectively leverages several recognized brands on its homepage as well.



www.ebay.com



www.dvdfile.com

if the company maintains stores in London, Paris, and Tokyo), or if it has a track record of longevity (for instance, if the company makes much fanfare of the fact that it has been in business since 1890), those important aspects should be cited on the homepage.

In contrast, when you're developing sites for start-ups that are not extensions of well-known brands, establishing credibility is tougher. The need for homepages that borrow from more familiar brands is thus made even more acute. In user experience testing,

we have seen firsthand the significance of borrowing better-known names and branding for start-ups. For example, a retail chain with a wonderful reputation worldwide was opening stores throughout the U.S. and launching a new site. They learned how important it was to feature both the brand names and logos prominently on their site to successfully win the confidence and interest of site visitors.

In another case, creators of a music site that would enable the user to download music to his computer discovered how crucial it was for their site to feature well-known artists from a broad spectrum of genres on the homepage. This convinced visitors that it was worthwhile to check out the site in question *and* take the time to download the requisite software.

Use Your Real Estate Wisely

The question of establishing credentials touches on the broader issue of how to make effective use of real estate on the homepage. Using borrowed credentials is one example of how to assist in making the unknown into the known.

Still, many companies fail in other ways to make the most of space on the homepage. Some sites commit the sin of extreme minimalism, which frustrates users who want to get right to a particular location but are forced to spend valuable seconds hunting. Or, alternatively, they swing to the opposite pole, making the homepage so busy, so inundated with detail, that the consumer is fairly bewildered about where to begin.

In our experience studying the reactions of users, most web site visitors would prefer to see a happy balance between these extremes—a balance that announces the following information:

- What the site is all about, for example, a place for buyers and sellers of Product X to meet.
- The key features and functions available to users on the homepage, so users know what they can do and learn there.
- Any special areas (perhaps time-sensitive), such as a holiday package or a featured story on alternative medicine.

Although homepage minimalism usually leaves visitors confused, we have observed that if a site becomes too busy, several potentially devastating consequences arise:

- Visitors “block out” those sections of the page that they decide are less important or “advertising.”
- Users simply don’t scroll below the fold; they don’t explore beyond what fits on their screen when the site first appears.
- In the worst cases, users become so overwhelmed that they either retreat to the left navigation bar to be taken off the page, or they exit the site altogether.

In each case, they miss out on key content and functionality because the page was not streamlined and prioritized. The problem of crowding and homepage “overkill” can seriously impede the effective viewing of a web site.

Why? Users will mentally “block out” advertising and any other sections that seem extraneous or hard to decipher. Similarly, they may never get far enough down the homepage to view areas of the site that may be of interest to them. Yet, left to their own devices, most will not scroll below the fold.

In user experience testing for a major retailer, we examined reactions to three variations on a homepage. The one to which consumers responded best was the version that was simplest, which clearly displayed the different products and services in the left navigation bar, introduced the different departments on the top navigation bar, and announced the “special” products, services, and for-sale items in the center frame.

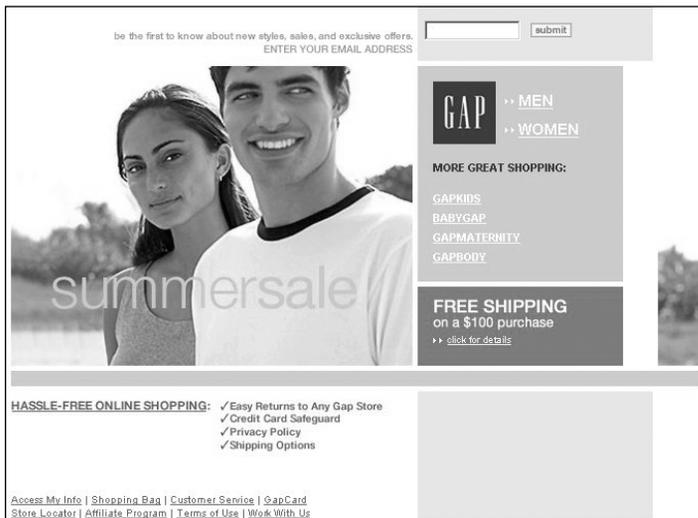
Users consistently ask for homepages that are simple, clean, organized, and prioritized by content. As a rule of thumb, users tell us that the “stuff” above the top navigation bar is typically advertising and is therefore ignored, that the “stuff” below the fold is perceived as not all that important, and that the content in the right column is often perceived as less important.



www.starbucks.com

Figure 3.4
(Next two images)

The Starbucks and Gap homepages are both clean and well-organized; they are prioritized by content and fit into the area above the fold.



www.gap.com

Knowing these perceptions, you can strategically use the homepage to direct users to where you want them to go. We suggest that you use the following order of importance in developing an effective use of homepage space:

- First announce who you are and what you offer.
- Prioritize the presentation of features, listing the most popular first.

- Try to use a brief and visually based presentation of a feature and offer a hyperlink for the user who wants to learn more.
- Try to limit the homepage to one online page. If this is not possible, place items that are least important to your site's objectives last—and don't be surprised if they're missed. Also, if you do have to place items below the fold, make sure that the placement of the "page break" doesn't obscure the fact that there is indeed "stuff" below the fold.
- Avoid the temptation to feature everything you offer. One way to avoid doing this is to determine (in focus groups) how users "bucket" and "label" what you have to offer. This will enable you to group features logically and create names that clearly announce to the user what to expect. Grouping features helps reduce clutter.

We believe that following these suggestions will help you make effective use of space on the homepage. Of course, such is not the goal of design per se. What consumers really want are homepages that can be used intuitively—meaning that they can understand what you offer without having to second-guess your labeling, figure out the navigation path, or seek additional help. Establishing credibility and the wise use of real estate are two steps in this process. A third involves ensuring that the overall design of the page is in service of a given company's "concept."

Make Sure Your Design Is in Service to Your Concept

We can't emphasize enough the importance of staying closely tethered to purposes for which the site was conceived in the first place. In writing this, we are keenly aware of how many misguided attempts to be different—to "break through the clutter" or adopt the latest technology—have resulted in web site designers failing to remember how important it is for their site to be in service to the following:

- The audience
- The goals the site is trying to achieve

- The brand
- The industry

If the site is intended to sell Armani, it had better look “Armani.” If it is an educational site, it must convey an image of intelligence and knowledge—intangible elements that are not simply built into perceptions of a store. If the site is an extension of an offline brand, it must successfully convey the image of that brand. And if it is a financial services site, it shouldn’t look like a disco (too funky or far out in its design and color scheme) to foster the seriousness of a place people trust with their money.

Also, some designs “fight” communication of what a site is all about. We’ve seen several sites use a magazine format on the homepage, which obscures the fact that the site is primarily an e-commerce site that also has editorial content to support the selling effort. When a user sees a “magazine,” she thinks “this is a place to read articles about cosmetics, not necessarily to buy them.”

Your Homepage Should Serve Your Strategic Goals

It is of critical importance to the success of a site to make sure the homepage clearly directs people to the strategic activities the site was designed to promote. Thus, if the goal of a site is to offload customer service from the call center, it is critical that the homepage points people clearly in the direction of online customer service—and makes it as appealing and apparent as possible. To this end, the homepage must announce what a given site was designed to accomplish in the first place, whether that’s to sell, to inform or educate, to extend your brand, or to provide an additional customer service channel.

As simple as these goals may sound in principle, we’ve seen many sites fail to accomplish them. They neglect to make it clear to users what functionality and content they are offering.

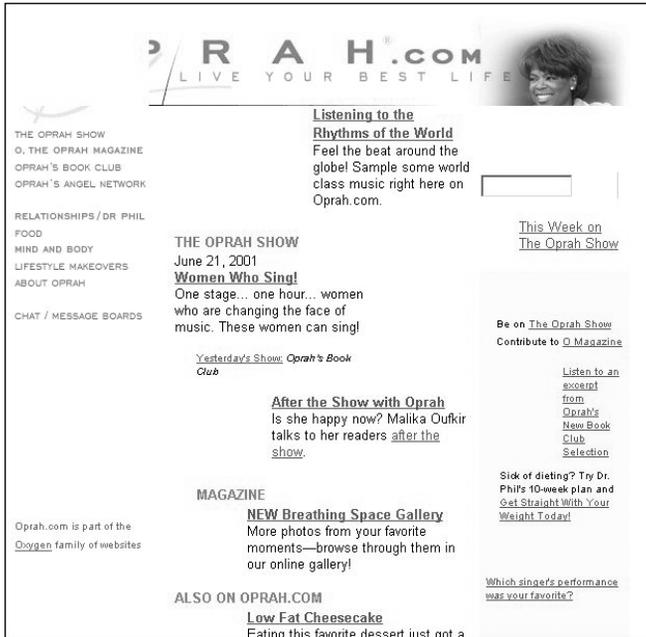
For example, one major brand constructed their site expressly for the purpose of creating an additional channel to sell products. At the outset, they used a small shopping cart icon on their homepage

to direct shoppers, even though the majority of the page contained corporate and industry news. Not surprisingly, few users understood that they could shop, let alone where they should go on the site to do so.

Similarly, a major computer company wanted their site to provide online customer service, to assist in handling high call volume for obtaining and installing printer drivers and patches. Yet the homepage offered no direct route to obtain these, and customers were forced to drill down through their product line, numbers, and models to find the needed driver or patch. Many of these customers were first time users who didn't feel confident about what a driver or patch was, so it wasn't long before they were headed for the 800 #.

We offer, as a final example, the case of a successful TV news channel that wanted to extend its programming and audience by creating a web site. While users enjoyed the site and felt that the show largely established the site's credibility, visitors didn't immediately see how the site related to the show. In research, we discovered that prospective visitors to the site anticipated much more from this site than a recapitulation of the day's headlines. Where was a calendar that showed upcoming programs and features? Where was a summary of the shows they'd missed? Why didn't the homepage direct them to more information about a particular company or topic covered on a show? After all, wasn't the Internet supposed to be *the* place to get as much information as possible on a given topic? Essentially, the site was losing out on key opportunities to extend the brand by providing practical information online that supplemented the television channel.

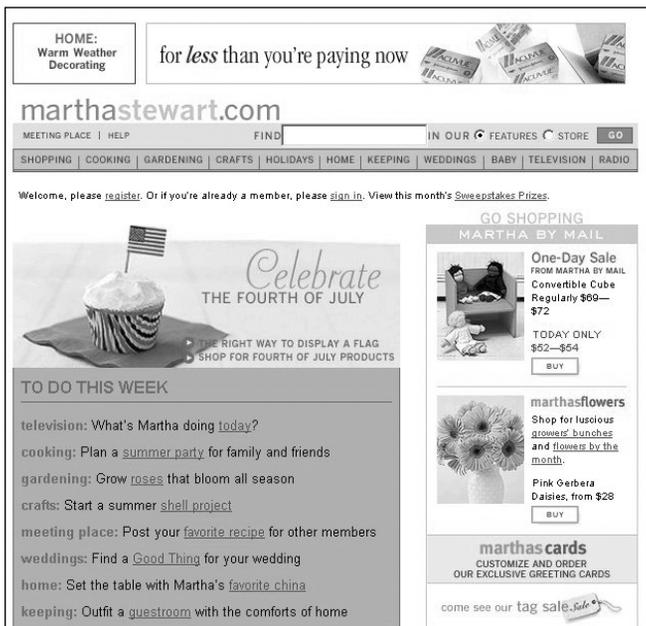
Each of these examples points to the relevance of using the homepage in near single-minded fashion; whatever other functions it serves, the page *must* successfully direct users to the more strategic pages on the site. Visitors to the homepage will thus view it as a "sign post," guiding them to where they *really* want to go.



www.oprah.com

Figure 3.5
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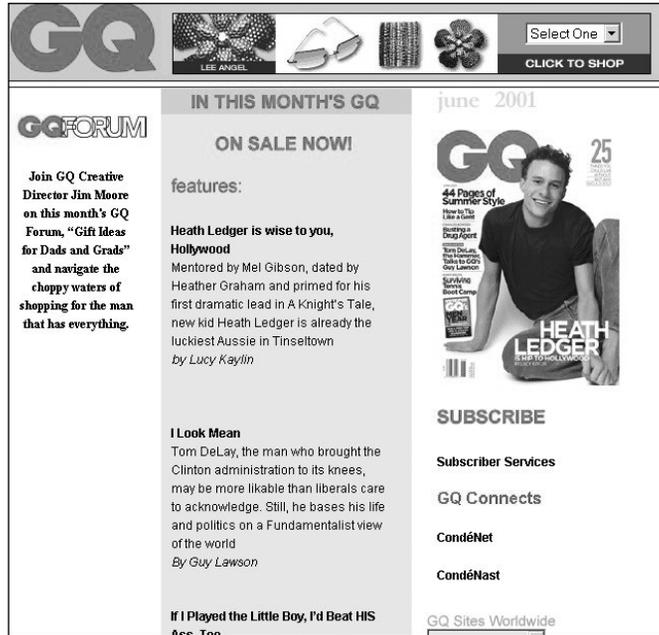
The homepages for television personalities Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart are online supplements to popular offline brands.



www.marthastewart.com

Figure 3.6

GQ.com both complements the newsstand version and offers consumers a way to subscribe online.



www.gq.com

Designers must learn to conceive of the page in this manner as well, imagining themselves as first-time visitors and walking an electronic mile in the user's shoes. If you are a designer, the questions to pose to yourself are clear:

- Is it obvious what you want the user to do?
- Is it obvious where the user is to go?

If not, have your team brainstorm what the homepage would need to do to fairly scream the relevant categories (for instance, “SHOP,” “COMPARE PRICES,” “GET HELP,” and so on) from the homepage. Indeed, if these and other links don't all but leap off the homepage to grab the consumer's attention, you can well expect these pages to go unviewed altogether, regardless of the toil that surely went into their construction.

The More the Merrier

Figure Out Who Your Customers Are and Welcome Them

Most sites serve multiple audiences with diverse agendas and a variety of reasons for visiting the site. To name but a few, different types of audiences include first time users and frequent visitors; subscribers and non-subscribers; commercial and residential customers; students and educators; patients and doctors. Such overlapping purposes can make the task of informing each of these audiences that they have “come to the right place” difficult. Once it has been decided which target audiences a site is intended for, an immediate question arises as to the way in which this multiplicity is effectively managed on the homepage.

To illustrate our point, consider the following case. A major retailer for whom we conducted research wanted to use their site to better serve its commercial customers—that is, people who buy in volume or buy special products that meet the needs of businesses as opposed to individual consumers. By contrast, their homepage featured lots of consumer-oriented products and specials and a variety of customer service offerings tailored to the needs of “regular folks.”

As you might guess, when commercial customers were shown the homepage, they immediately assumed that the site offered nothing for them, and felt that they were better off going to the store or using the catalog. The “Commercial Customers” button on the top navigation bar simply wasn’t enough to entice them. Had they selected that button, they would have found a page completely tailored for them. However, few commercial customers got that far, and our research surmised that the homepage was in trouble—at least from a business-to-business perspective.

Testing revealed that what was most compelling to commercial customers (such as volume discounts, tax exempt status, and special products tailored to their industries) was all but absent from the homepage. We therefore recommended that the homepage be redesigned so that a major piece of real estate—the page center—would be devoted to reflecting the needs of commercial customers.

Figure 3.7
(Next two images)

The MasterCard site reaches out to both consumers and commercial customers (through a special area of the site).



www.mastercard.com



www.mastercard.com/business

This section communicated the benefits of registering as a commercial customer and, in so doing, created a compelling path to that area of the site that was more expressly designed for their needs.

Sites that serve multiple audiences with diverse needs must use their homepages wisely to generate an impression with members of each of its audiences that there is a special place for *them* on the site. This is especially important for the homepage because it is here that visitors will find “front doors” to other areas and pages of the site.

The following are a few tips on how to achieve this goal:

- Be sure to call each target group by a name they call themselves (for example, “commercial customers” or “B2B”). This definition may be influenced by company size (for example, companies of fewer than 100 employees); if so, this needs to be made clear.
- Give each audience equal “weight,” so that each feels significant, and so the site is designed for that group in particular.
- Avoid content or advertising that might appeal to some among one audience, but which you suspect could offend or perplex others; for instance, stock price info on a health insurance site or candy advertising on a diaper site).
- Again, use visuals to your best advantage wherever they are relevant to direct your audience. For instance, you might use a photograph of kids and parents employed as a guide that leads each group to its own section of the site.
- Cite benefits of interest to each target audience so they know both how and why they would want to click further.

Tell the Truth Up-Front

Bad News Is Worse in the Check-Out Aisle!

Finally, it is important to emphasize that, ultimately, no one site can hope to be all things to all people, no matter how many audiences developers believe can be realistically served. Companies

that fear informing their visitors of the site's limitations fail to realize that abrupt discovery of the "truth" is infinitely more annoying once a user has invested ten (or more) minutes of time. Here are a few examples of "truths" that we feel should be self-evident on the homepage:

- Nations or states to which one *cannot* ship your product (such as wine).
- Products you offer that are not available online.
- Products and services that are not available.
- Areas of the nation/world that aren't yet covered by the service in question.

Being honest communicates integrity. Moreover, it's a simple matter to provide a mechanism that will inform prospective customers when the desired products and services *will* become available. As opposed to duplicity, this strategy will quite possibly foster future relationships with customers—preferable, by any standard, to severing a fragile trust with half-truths and apparent dead-ends.

A Few Hard Questions

To summarize, when you or a team of developers is constructing a site's homepage, ask yourself whether ambiguity surrounds the following "hard questions." If so, you might consider clarifying the page:

- What is the site all about?
- For whom is the site intended?
- Why should people stick around, anyway?
- What do people need to know about the company to place their trust in its web site?
- What should people know about a site so they are not misled and do not waste their time?