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chapter 2

SIX PRINCIPLES OF GOOD COMMERCE DESIGN

Guidelines to keep in mind throughout the process

Web-design books are usually more focused on style than design. Design focuses on understanding your subject or content and devising a useful way for it to serve its audience. Style is a necessary component of design but one that is narrowly concerned with visual presentation.

The distinction is important and often overlooked. As Web designer Jeffrey Zeldman says, when the distinction between style and design is lost, “we get meaningless eye candy that gives beauty a bad name.”¹

In the best designs, style takes a back seat to the appropriate solution. On the Web, issues of speed, organization, clarity, and consistency drive your solution.

During the site-building process, you will be frequently challenged and sometimes confused about the right design choices to make. In Chapters 3, 4, and especially 5, we provide concrete ways to design a total commerce experience for your customers. This chapter focuses on putting customer experience first and the customer’s low tolerance for poor performance and service. Keeping the following principles in mind will make it easier to do the right thing.



Principle 1: Speed Is the First Priority

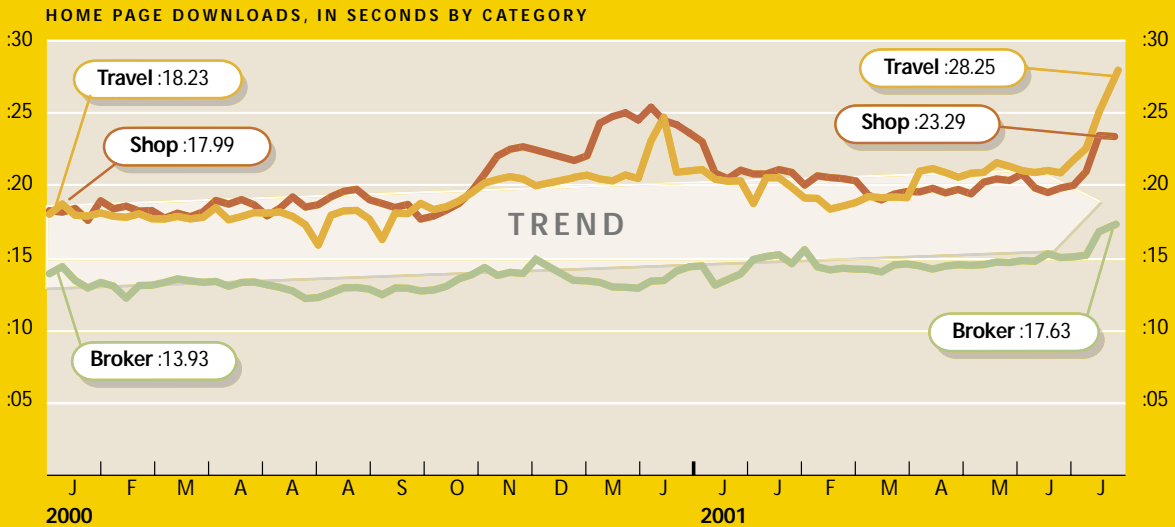
Most designers do not think of speed as a design issue. But the Web is an interactive experience, not purely a visual one. Interactive experiences put the user in control of the pace. When a user has to wait, they have lost control and the experience is diminished.

Customers don't care why they have to wait—a poor dial-up connection, Internet congestion, or problems with your server. They want what's on your site now, and not a second later. Site visitors who have to wait too long for your page to display will go elsewhere, no matter how useful or relevant your site is.

Much research has focused on the time it takes to for a Web page to load in a browser and what effect that has on purchasing.

Studies have revealed the significant impact of poor download time. Consumers believe that the Internet provides service on demand. Asking them to defer their requests results in loss of customers.² An estimated \$25 billion in revenue is lost annually due to Web performance issues.³

Zona Research found that one Web site had a home page abandonment rate of 30 percent. That means that about 1 out of every 3 site visitors left after requesting the home page. By reducing the load time of this page by approximately 1 second, the site was able to lower this rate to 6–8 percent.



Source: Keynote Consumer 40 Internet Performance Index

FIGURE 2.1: HOME PAGE PERFORMANCE SLOWING DOWN

Data suggests that the trend in commerce sites is for slower, not faster, loading home pages, despite research that shows site visitors respond negatively. The addition of more advertising and the prevalence of dynamically generated pages have contributed to the sluggish performance. This chart shows average response times (access and download) on 56-Kbps connections to popular travel, shopping, and stock brokerage sites.

It seems as though there is little attention paid to the issue of speed. Fig. 2.1 shows that the home page of commerce Web sites are getting increasingly slow, despite complaints from users. This is largely because companies focus solely on content quality as the key to constructing a meaningful

experience. But, as research shows, customers regard a sluggish site as unusable (See Fig. 2.2). Therefore, meeting acceptable download times is a top priority in designing a usable commerce site. As a designer, you can play a significant role in meeting this need.

Many commerce sites use specialized content delivery services such as Akamai and Digital Island. These companies have devised sophisticated systems that intelligently remove much of the latency in the network.

The realities of the network

The Internet is a complex, distributed network that supports an ever-increasing amount of data and users. It was born as a service to connect academic, government, and military institutions and was never designed to handle billions of dollars of international commerce. As a consequence, it has limitations. The most noticeable is called latency, or lag. As packets of data travel from one computer to another, delays are bound to happen. Latency is the time that elapses between the request and response for information between computers.

During the past few years, a large portion of Web content, like that served by many commerce sites, has become dynamic. Assembling content in real-time (dynamic) rather than delivering static pages requires not just adequate bandwidth but highly responsive Web servers and applications. Any delays caused by information processing will only add to the network delays. Much of the responsiveness of your site depends on a complex interplay of networking technology, software, and hardware.

A prerequisite to designing for maximized speed is understanding how a page gets from your server to the customer and where the potential slowdowns can occur along the way (See Fig. 2.3).

The blame game

Although so much can go wrong with the networking process, most of these factors are invisible to the casual user. If the page loads slowly with gaping blank rectangles where images should be, teams call the designer first, because your work is supremely visible. Plus, it's easier for the team to ask you to shave another kilobyte off your pages than to debug a logjam in the application server.

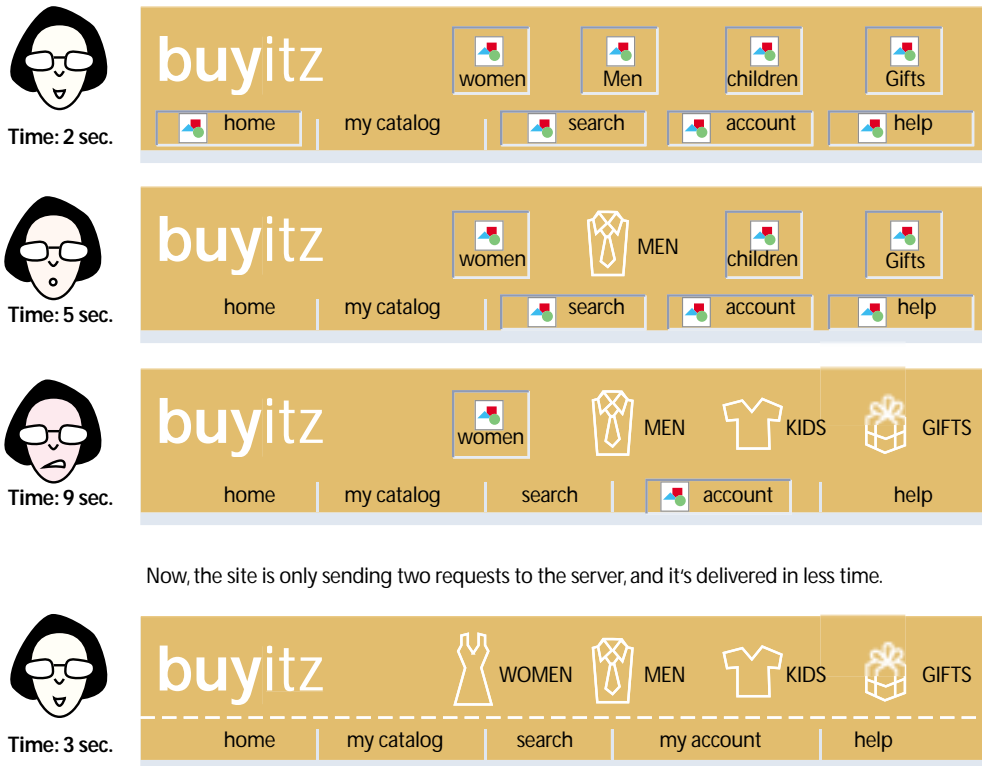
You can be valuable to your design team by being prepared to handle such situations. Having a copy of Fig. 2.3 is a good start. It will help you understand what you can fine-tune in your design and suggest other places for your team to search for the problem when your fine-tuning isn't enough.

If you get blamed for slow downloading pages, gather ammunition. Begin with any pertinent performance data. Log the sizes of your pages complete with HTML and images. Some HTML editing software programs, such as Macromedia's Dreamweaver, will calculate this for you. Set a page size limit and make sure none of the pages exceed it. Get a contract with a company like Keynote Systems⁴ that can measure the download times and latency of your site continuously. The speed of your site should be a priority for frequent testing. We cover the testing process in Chapter 6.

FIGURE 2.2: DON'T LET SLOW DOWNLOADS TEST PATIENCE OR HAMPER USABILITY

With the majority of the world still using low-bandwidth connections, try to keep as few elements on your page as possible. For example, if you are using graphics for navigation, group them together as one graphic instead of separate ones.

This site has chosen to break up their navigation into ten separate elements. The browser will need to query the server for each element. You end up with an erratic display, as each request is fulfilled. If the server is overloaded, some pieces may never load.



Now, the site is only sending two requests to the server, and it's delivered in less time.

FIGURE 2.3:
SPEEDING UP
THE PROCESS

Before you design a fast site, you must understand how a Web page gets from your servers to the customer. This is a complex, and mostly invisible, process that is loaded with potential potholes.

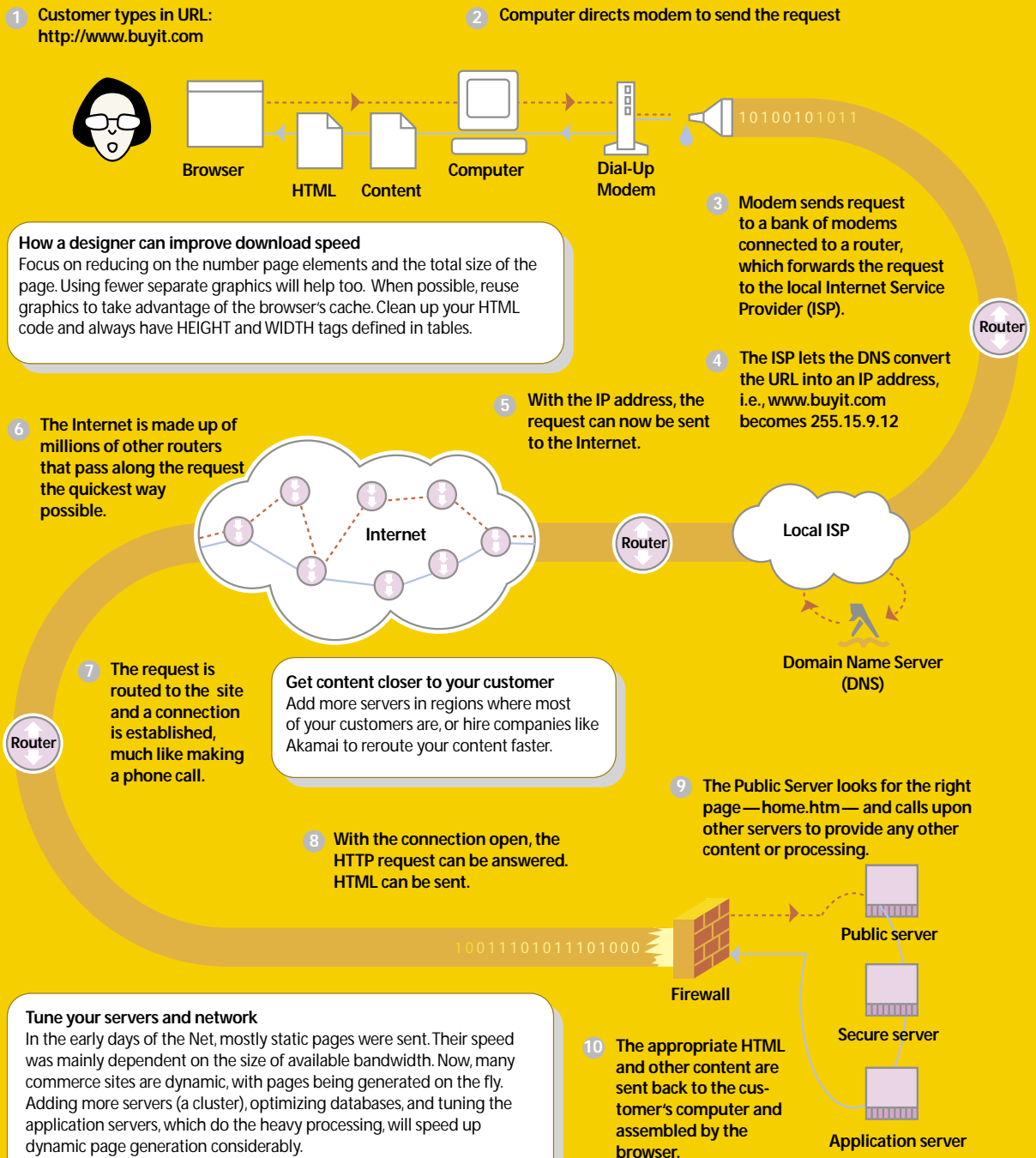
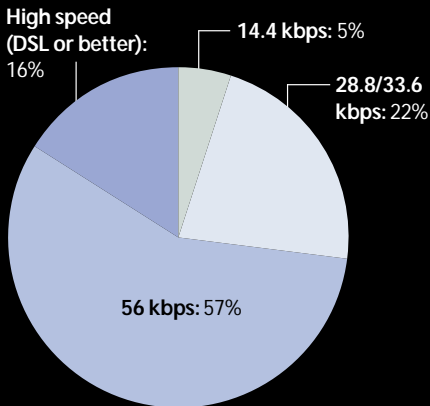


FIGURE 2.4: ONLINE USERS BY CONNECTION SPEED

Percent of total Internet audience



Source: Zona Research, "The Need for Speed II" April, 2001

FIGURE 2.5: CONSIDER BANDWIDTH

This chart is useful to estimate how long a given page will take to download on an optimal network. However, remember that latencies in the network will add delays.

	Connection Speed			
	28.8 kb	33.6 kb	56.6 kb	ISDN 128
10k	00:02	00:02	00:01	00:00
20k	00:05	00:04	00:02	00:01
30k	00:08	00:07	00:04	00:01
40k	00:11	00:09	00:05	00:02
50k	00:14	00:12	00:07	00:03
60k	00:17	00:14	00:08	00:03
70k	00:19	00:17	00:10	00:04
80k	00:22	00:19	00:11	00:05
90k	00:25	00:21	00:13	00:05
100k	00:28	00:24	00:14	00:06
110k	00:31	00:26	00:15	00:07
120k	00:34	00:29	00:17	00:07
130k	00:36	00:31	00:18	00:08
140k	00:39	00:34	00:20	00:08
150k	00:42	00:36	00:21	00:09

Total Page Size (HTML + Graphics)

Tolerable
 Exceeds average tolerance

Source: Intel Download Calculator
http://www.intel.com/home/tech-center/calculate_download/

The bottom line

While a growing percentage of users are adopting faster access connections, knowing that the bulk of the online audience is still using dial-up access is crucial (See Fig. 2.4). Testing shows visitors' download tolerance levels range from 2 to 10 seconds. Since all evidence shows that faster is indeed better, shoot for a target of 4–5 seconds per page (See Fig. 2.5). Meeting this mark could mean the difference of hundreds of thousands of dollars to your bottom line.

With a clear idea of historical performance and an inventory of page sizes, you'll be able to refocus the team on other culprits. More important, you can become the user advocate on speed issues and make it the primary criteria for delivering a good user experience.

Imagine that someone from the sales department walks in and says "We need two more ad positions on this page." You should be able to respond, "Adding these positions will also add an average of 28KB per page to the download time. That slowdown will affect sales negatively. Are you willing to make that tradeoff?" Granted, it won't always be that simple to explain, but by connecting requests to reality you'll be able to educate all parties involved on this issue.

Speed is a design issue, but it's not the only area in which you can make a difference. As a designer, you can do more than crunch JPEGs or clean up HTML. If you design your site to be easier to use, your customers will perceive your site as being fast, even if its actual download times remain the same.

Principle 2: Make It Easy to Use

Making your site easy to use is, well, easier said than done. According to usability expert Jakob Nielsen, visitors trying to find or buy something on a commerce site are only successful about 56 percent of the time.⁵ Your company might have invested in blazingly fast servers and ruthlessly squeezed extra bits out of your graphics, but if every other customer can't use the search engine or find the shopping cart, what hope do you have of delivering a valuable user experience?

Be familiar

"Make the interface intuitive!" is the battle cry voiced by CEOs and designers alike. We all say this because we've been told hundreds of times that an intuitive interface will win us friends and customers. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as an inherently intuitive interface.

In his book *The Humane Interface*, Jef Raskin explains: "When users say that an interface is intuitive, they mean that it operates just like some other software or method with which they are familiar."

Yes, it's true. You don't have to explore the depths of your customers' collective unconscious to design an interface. A successful interface incorporates many familiar elements already established on popular sites. If it's familiar, then there is nothing new to for the site visitor to learn. The more your site follows standards and design conventions, the better chance it will be easier to use.

Learning from convention does not necessarily mean that you must sacrifice the appearance of your Web site. Rather, your site's interaction and response should be predictable. Imagine how awful it would be if the dial pad of every phone worked as differently, as so many sites' interfaces do. The number of phone calls would certainly plummet.

Designers sometimes wrestle with conventions. Developing something fresh and new is part of our job. However, there are some things that shouldn't be messed with. A classic example is the shopping cart (See Fig. 2.6). For years, companies have tried to use other metaphors for the cart and failed miserably. One clever outdoor products company tried a shopping sled. No one understood it. They converted to the cart and revenues took off.

Vincent Flanders calls this
rollover icon design
"mystery meat navigation."
As he says on his site,
Webpagesthatsuck.com,
"Web design is not about art,
it's about making money (or
disseminating information).
To make money, you don't
want to design a site that
might confuse someone."

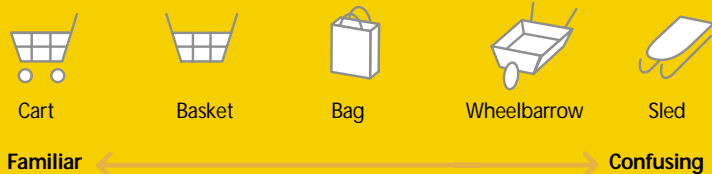


FIGURE 2.6: STICK WITH THE FAMILIAR

Retailers have experimented with different cart metaphors to build personality and brand identity—from the sled to the wheelbarrow. To avoid confusion, use what is most familiar—the shopping cart.

Organize in a logical way

Your site's success will also depend upon your ability to organize information. But organization requires understanding your customer's goals.

In a Blockbuster store, you'll find your favorite Jackie Chan movies under the aisle labeled Action. However, if a brand new Chan film comes out, it can only be found under New Releases. Stores deal with physical products, so a copy of Jackie Chan's latest movie can't be in two departments at once.

Because of this limitation, Blockbuster minimizes the number of categories for the customer and reduces the risk of ambiguity. Ambiguity in the store arises when something can be categorized in more than one way, but can only exist in one location (i.e., "It's action-packed and funny but it also has a heart.") A customer looking for a

Chan film might first think to look under the Action section. If they couldn't find there, Comedy would be a next likely choice.

Online, you're not limited by the physical constraints. Categorization can be broader, but still effective. Ambiguity is averted by placing the Jackie Chan film in many likely areas: Action, Comedy, Martial Arts, Foreign Film, New Release, and Popular.

Some designers of commerce sites make the assumption that they can apply an off-line organizational scheme to their Web site. Unfortunately, the two situations are not equivalent. First, your Web customers might not be familiar with the nomenclature or departments of your "bricks-and-mortar" store. For example, the store might have a department called "Relaxing," which has recliners, massagers, TVs, stereos, and soothing CDs. Online, the products are

more likely to be discovered in literal categories: Furniture, Electronics, Music.

Navigating your way through a retail store is different than searching for something online. In a store, because a customer can scan in a large amount of visual information quickly, it's easy to browse through thousands of items in minutes. Online, that would be tedious and unnecessary because you can present the customer with a categorization scheme that best fits what they want to do.

For example, you own a Mac and want to buy some learning software for your child. In a store, you might go to the Mac section, and be presented with ten titles. However, in the Windows section, there are another fifty titles labeled For Windows and Mac. You probably didn't think to look in that section. Online, you could be presented with all sixty at once and even be given the option to sort this list further.

There are several useful schemes for categorization:

- **Alphabetical:** The most logical organization scheme for a dictionary or phone book. It is typically used to provide order within other schemes. For example, Blockbuster organizes by movie genre then alphabetically by title.

- **Chronological:** Organizing by date is useful for subjects like automobiles, antiques, and wines.
- **Geographical:** Organizing information based on place is useful for gardening, real estate, and travel. It's also valuable when location is relevant to buying, i.e., shipping costs or physical store locations.
- **Task oriented:** Requires that content be organized as an outline of a process. For example: Select a home, find an agent, choose a mortgage. The organization reinforces the steps a customer needs to take.
- **Topical:** More challenging than the first four options, designing topical schemes requires defining limits to the breadth of content. Do you want to cover every topic like the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or a focused few like the Discovery Channel?
- **Visitor specific:** You might wish to design your information to fit into neat categories for different types of visitors, based on psychographic or demographic traits. For example, an apparel site might have site content arranged differently for women than men.

In some instances, you might need to use a hybrid of schemes. Figure 2.7 shows how a national retailer could take advantage of a mix of topical and alphabetical groupings.

What information does your customer need and how they might be guided to a decision? Organize around a customer task so you can understand your visitors' goals.

“Chunking” is an important principle for organizing site information. In 1956, a Harvard psychologist named George A. Miller published a groundbreaking article titled “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two.”⁶ In this article, he reveals that people are adept at recalling small chunks of information as long as there are no more than nine pieces, with seven being an optimal number. Breaking information into appropriately sized chunks improves comprehension and our ability to find and retrieve information.

Be clear, stay simple

Knowing that people need information to be presented in easily digestible chunks means our designs and navigation must be simple and direct.

This might seem obvious to you, but it seems to have been forgotten by legions of other designers. As an example, take the phenomenon that can still be found on many sites, which we call “concentration navigation.”

Concentration navigation is one of the cardinal sins of interface design. A rollover button forces visitors to mouse over an icon

to identify it and then remember it for future use. The problem is exacerbated the more icons there are to identify. A few years ago, a global soft drink manufacturer used a navigation bar similar to the first example in Fig 2.8. The fifteen icons are almost twice as many as Miller's “chunking limit.” In an information-overloaded society, the last thing you want to do is force your customers to memorize your navigation—because they won't.

Another complication when designing a navigation structure is that your site does not exist in its own consistent world. It's an interface within an interface within an interface—your site, within a browser, within an operating system—each with its own look and feel. The combination can be the source of endless frustration. For example, if your site disables the browser back button or scroll bars, you are killing something that customers are already familiar with. This unexpected change will make visitors impatient and confused.

Designing in a nested environment such as this calls for simplicity. Once customers have found your site, don't scare them off with an overwhelming flood of animated graphics, intricate backgrounds and strange buttons. Your most important job is to engage them to buy, not to marvel at your design acumen.

1 Unorganized/Random

GIFTS
SCHOOL TIME
BED + BATH
HOME FURNISHINGS
HOME OFFICE
KITCHEN
BABY
CLOTHES
JEWELRY + ACCESSORIES
HEALTH + BEAUTY
ELECTRONICS
MUSIC / MOVIES / BOOKS
SPORTS + LUGGAGE
TOYS
CLEARANCE

2 Alphabetical

BABY
BED + BATH
CLEARANCE
CLOTHES
ELECTRONICS
GIFTS
HEALTH + BEAUTY
HOME FURNISHINGS
HOME OFFICE
JEWELRY + ACCESSORIES
KITCHEN
MUSIC / MOVIES / BOOKS
SCHOOL TIME
SPORTS + LUGGAGE
TOYS

3 Topic + Alpha

ENTERTAINMENT
Books, Movies, Music
Sports
FASHION + STYLE
Accessories, Jewelry
Beauty, Health
Clothes
Luggage
HOME
Bed + Bath
Electronics
Furnishings
Kitchen
Office
KIDS
Baby
School Time
Toys
GIFTS
CLEARANCE

FIGURE 2.7: RATIONAL ORGANIZATION
A navigation list needs some measure of order if it is going to be quickly parsed by the site visitor. Example 1 has no discernable logic and is not useful. Grouping and alphabetizing make a list easy to use.



Try it

With each list, try to locate Kitchen or Baby products. Then wait about 30 seconds and come back and try again. Notice how the lack of organization in example 1 makes you reread the entire list each time.

1 Icons with no clear organization



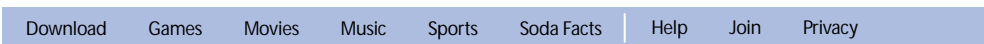
The icons fail to be clear about what they represent. Can you pick which icon represents the Music section? The visitor has to roll their cursor over each icon just to figure out what it represents. This navigation feels more like a game than a useful tool for finding information on the site.

2 Unorganized with text labels



Adding labels to the icons begins to clear up confusion over what the icons represent but not necessarily what they mean. They are also seemingly redundant. What's the difference between Music and Jukebox or Arcade and Games? Aren't these the same? And what exactly is Essence? This still feels like a game, not navigation.

3 Organized with text navigation



The best solution is to replace icons with larger type and rethink the number of navigation choices. This example is much more direct. We have reduced fifteen choices down to nine understandable areas of the site—an approach called “chunking.”

FIGURE 2.8: CONCENTRATION NAVIGATION
Typically, using icons as the sole means for navigation does more harm than good. Here's an example of pitfalls found on a menu bar of a large soft drink manufacturer site and some possible solutions.

Principle 3: Keep It Consistent

Newspaper designers have long understood the importance of consistency in their work. Look at the front page of any paper. Although the news may be very different day to day, the page's navigational elements stay in the same place. The newspaper's logo stays at the top. The index is usually fixed in a corner. No designer at a newspaper wastes time worrying if the headlines should run horizontally or vertically. As a result, people feel comfortable with a newspaper and designers don't have to reinvent it every day.

Jakob Nielsen has said, “Consistency is one of the most powerful usability principles: when things always behave the same, users don't have to worry about what will happen. Instead, they know what will happen based on earlier experience.”⁷

For your visitors to benefit, your site will need to follow consistency in both design and interaction. Design consistency includes grid, navigation, link colors, button styles, font usage, control elements and metaphors. Use templates, cascading style sheets, and style guidelines to help manage this task (See Fig. 2.9).

Interaction deals with the behavior of your site, which should be understandable, predictable and persistent. People don't like to learn things unless they feel they can apply that knowledge in many places. Strive to reduce what a user needs to learn to complete a desired task.

*“A foolish consistency is the
hobgoblin of little minds.”*

—Emerson

FIGURE 2.9

Clothes.com


MEN	WOMEN
CLOTHING	CLOTHING
OUTERWEAR	OUTERWEAR
SHOES	SHOES
BRIEFCASES	JEWELRY
WHAT'S NEW	WHAT'S NEW
BOYS	GIRLS
CLOTHING	CLOTHING
SHOES	SHOES
BACKPACKS	JEWELRY
WHAT'S NEW	WHAT'S NEW

YOUR CART

SEARCH **FIND**

DEAL OF THE DAY \ THE CLASSIC

Understated leather buck with a comfortable foot bed lining.



\$185

BE CONSISTENT

Consistency makes things easier to design. A Web designer doesn't have to rethink the navigation or how the page should fit with the overall design. Use templates, cascading style sheets, and style guidelines to help in manage this task.

Of course, consistency doesn't guarantee a usable site. Poor visual and interaction design used consistently is still consistently bad design. Consistency has several benefits to your Web site:

- Consistency reinforces a sense of place, helping users to know where they are on the site and what to expect next.
- Consistency makes things easier to use. Every successful task performed reinforces familiarity.
- Consistency makes things easier to design. A Web designer doesn't have to rethink the navigation, the location of content elements on a page, or how the page should fit with the overall design.
- Consistency protects design from passing fads by keeping navigation simple and direct.
- Consistency reinforces branding.

GUIDE AND DIRECT

Navigation and search stay in the same place because customers depend on these elements for finding what they want. Maintaining consistency will build confidence as the customer continues deeper into the site.

Clothes.com

MEN	DRESS
CLOTHING	CASUAL
OUTERWEAR	BOOTS
SHOES	
BRIEFCASES	
WHAT'S NEW	

YOUR CART

MEN

WOMEN




KIDS

BOYS

GIRLS

SEARCH **FIND**

SEARCH for "Dress shoes" found 10 results

	The Classic Understated leather buck; three eyelets. PRICE: \$185.00 SEE DETAILS
	Workman Sleek power boots, with comfort foot bed. PRICE: \$210.00 SEE DETAILS
	The Crescent Distressed leather buck, with five eyelets. PRICE: \$155.00 SEE DETAILS

ORES LOCATIONS CAREERS

Clothes.com

MEN	DRESS
CLOTHING	CASUAL
OUTERWEAR	BOOTS
SHOES	
BRIEFCASES	
WHAT'S NEW	

YOUR CART

MEN

WOMEN




KIDS

BOYS

GIRLS

SEARCH **FIND**

DRESS

Crescent Workman

The Classic
STYLE: DC 1293C
PRICE: \$185.00

Understated leather buck with a comfortable foot bed lining.

Custom shoe options

Size 10.5 EE Choose Color

1 pair

ADD TO CART **EMAIL TO FRIEND**

ACT THE SAME

The grid structure and color palette are important elements of creating consistency. Notice that all action buttons are designed the same, and placed in relative proximity to the task.

MY ACCOUNT CONTACT US FAQ STORES LOCATIONS CAREERS

Principle 4: Have a Personality

Our traditional notions of branding have given way to a much deeper focus on understanding the customer experience. Brand has become more than a sharp logo. Brand identity is equal to the sum of all the impressions an organization makes on its customers.

For those designing commerce sites, this is a significant shift in thinking. The Web is a highly public, visual, and interactive medium. Therefore, it has the power to build or erode an established experience quickly.

It is critical to understand how an organization defines its brand before beginning a project, since your job is to successfully interpret this brand idea into an interactive experience. A designer must always be asking, “Does the final site properly represent the company?”

Companies are now in the experience business, and brand identity equals experience. Walk into an Apple store and you will be immediately aware of how true that is. Apple’s stores use refined architecture, lively signage, and interactive displays to direct the consumer towards a consistent, coherent and unique experience (See Fig. 2.10).

Apple’s marketing message on its Web site promotes the computer as something that will unleash your creative power. The physical store reinforces that message by allowing you to flex that power with unlimited verve. For example, walk up to the display called “And the award for Best Director goes to... you!” You are presented with several video cameras tied to Macs running iMovie. Right there, you can practice your skills.

Smart approaches to branding result in designs that are appropriate and responsible to the original intent of the brand; consistent and coherent identity; and a memorable experience that distinguishes the company from its competition.



Photo by Shayne Bowman/Hypergenic.net.

A hands-on experience at the Apple store in Plano, Texas.

ADVERTISING

Using images of Alfred Hitchcock, Albert Einstein, Miles Davis, and Jim Henson, Apple aims to associate the customer with undisputable creative geniuses.

WEB SITE

Tutorials, testimonials, forums, and case studies portray Apple products as enablers of creative expression. Some functionality, such as iTools, allow easy Web creation.

STORE

Predominance of hands-on displays invites you to get a taste of creative energy. Every device in the store is ready for you. The signage is always a call to action: "Rip. Mix. Burn."



MESSAGE

Apple computers unleash your creative power.

FIGURE 2.10: TRUE TO THE MESSAGE

Branding defines the total customer experience.

Personality is a subset of branding that deals with the distinctive face you put on that experience.

The designer's challenge is to extend the offline message into a complementary online experience.

Every choice a designer makes in a traditional medium—from typeface to the packaging—takes into consideration the consumer's experience. Will the type be too hard to read? Will the package style be appropriate to the brand?

Personality is vital because it paints a unique and distinguished portrait of the brand experience for the consumer. Your visitors interact with many kinds of sites from the familiar to the strange. If handled skillfully, your site's personality will separate it from the mass of competitors and make it more memorable.

Personality manifests itself in every element of your site, from the colors you choose to the writing style to the photography and the grid. Your site's personality should reflect its purpose. How thoughtfully you combine elements such as words, image, video, animation, sound, color, and

interactivity on a page will either reinforce or corrode what you've established. Some thoughts to consider:

Words: While you may not be responsible for the writing, be sure that the copy you are given is consistent and authentic in tone and voice. According to Jakob Nielsen, the best writing style is concise, scanable, and objective, free of marketing lingo and hyperbole.

Bad

LL Bean's World Famous Lined Field Coat: No trip out into the woods would be complete without this sturdy, workaday cotton canvas coat. One of our most popular products sports the legendary 3M™ Scotchlite™ Reflective Material back patch. Of course, it comes with the quintessential button-out Bean pile lining. Comes in four fashionable colors that never go out of style: Soft Olive, Saddle Brown, Cardinal and Hunter. Imported from Peru, featuring 100 years of family craftsmanship.

Good

Bean's Lined Field Coat

- Button-out pile lining in a polyester/ acrylic blend.
- Prewashed, heavyweight 10 oz. cotton canvas.
- 3M™ Scotchlite™ Reflective Material back patch.
- Imported.
- Machine wash and dry.
- 4 colors: Olive, Brown, Red, Green

Photography: The quality and style of the photography is an important factor in establishing personality. Images should be chosen with an eye not only for style, but for how useful they are to the customer in making a purchase decision.

Animation & Video: Video is good for showing features of products that can't be demonstrated with text and images, such as a QTVR of a home. Video and animation are also good for high-end, stylized advertisements. But be wary of using this type of content. It requires special talent, skill, and

technology to pull off properly. It also requires that your customer have a good enough connection to experience it. Cheesy animations and choppy, low-quality video are death to personality. Allow site visitors to request video. Do not force them to view it before getting to what they want.

Sound: Use sparingly, because it adds significantly to download time. Allow site visitors to request sound. Do not force it on them. If the sound is only used as background, make it easy for site visitors to turn it on or off.

Your site's brand identity and personality are as important as the information it contains and the technology it uses.



FIGURE 2.11: WHAT'S YOUR BRAND'S PERSONALITY?

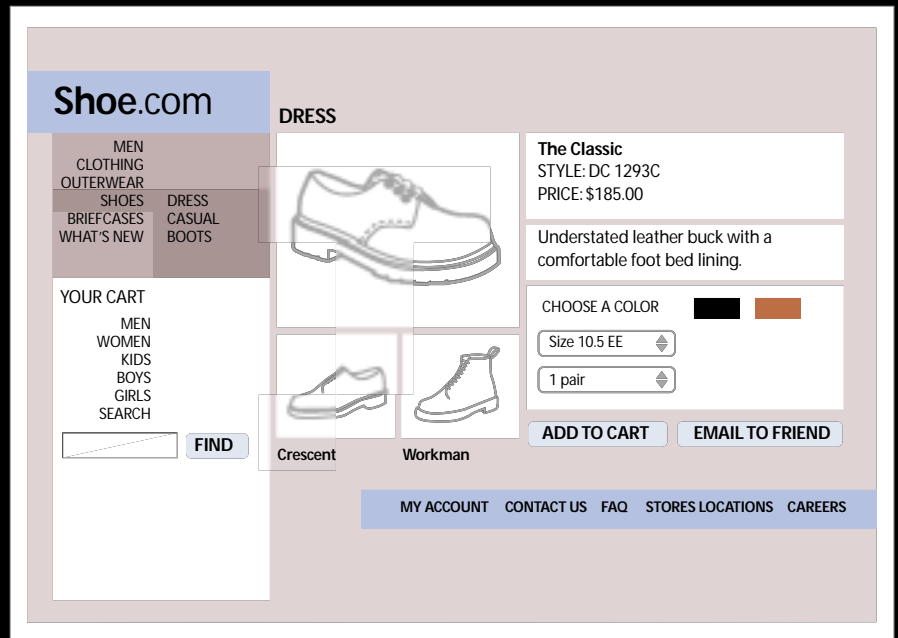
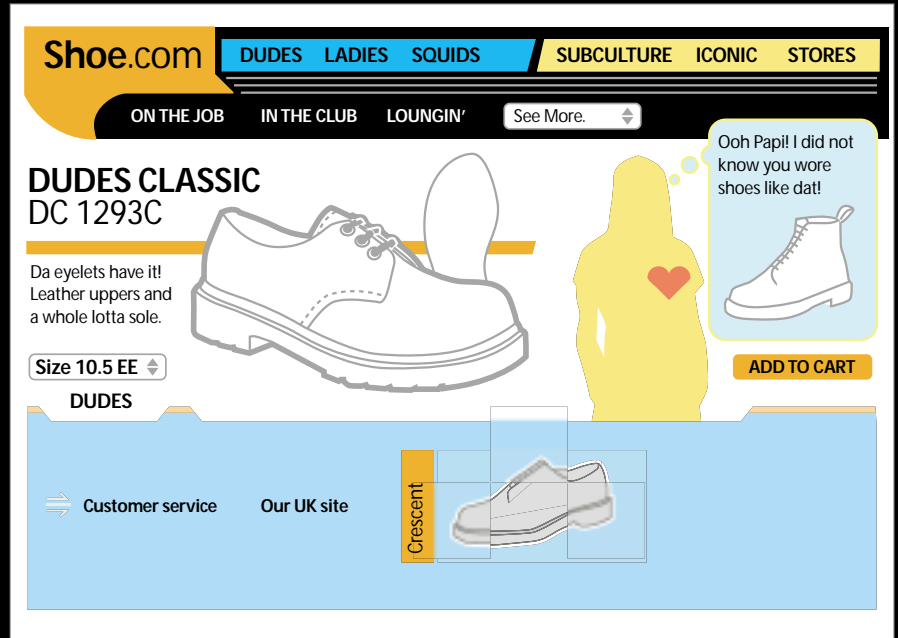
Personality manifests itself in every element of your site, from the colors and language to the photos and grid. The personality should reflect the site's purpose, as well as match offline identity.

HIP

Many sites that want to attract a hipper clientele put style before substance. Notice that the text accompanying the product and in the navigation is not instructional but more about mood and emotion. The color palette on sites like these tend to be brighter, and bolder. Many elements of design are decorative, and do not operate in conventional ways. This approach may be entirely appropriate to your brand, but it has usability pitfalls.

URBANE

Clientele for sites like these are equally image conscious, but in a different way. Notice that the language in the navigation is direct. But the language with the product contains a little touch of personality. The color palette tends to be more restrained. Many elements of design are also decorative, but operate in conventional ways. This approach may be appropriate to your brand as well.



Color: A key indicator of personality. Pick a color palette that differentiates you from competitors. Don't be too loud with colors because too many active colors can become distracting (see first example in Fig. 2.11). Color is excellent for providing direction. For example, you could use a unique color to signal action buttons like Find or Add to Cart or Checkout (See Fig. 2.12).

Interactivity: Your social interactions define your personality. The same is true of your site's interactions. Think of interactions as a form of conversation. The site says something and the user says something back. So what are some of the qualities of good social interaction? Ask for permission first. Say please and thank you. Invite a friend along. Play nice with others. (You get the idea.) A site that makes users sign in before they do anything, has the potential to project different personalities, depending on how it's presented and handled. It may say "We care about your privacy," or it may say, "Members only. Stay out."

All of these elements should add up to a single personality. Is your company witty? Reserved? Irreverent? Dependable? Nerdy? Cool? In Figure 2.11, we show two approaches to site personality.

In the rush to be hip or sophisticated or clever, some designers take personality too far. Remember the cart example in Figure 2.6, where a garden store used a wheelbarrow for the cart? That's not personality, it's a cheap gimmick on the face of something meaningful. Likewise, having a bat fly across your screen might sound neat for Halloween but would jeopardize the trustworthiness of a brokerage site like Charles Schwab or the sophistication of a retailer like Williams-Sonoma.

The ultimate job of brand identity is to create a company personality that customers can identify and want to associate themselves with. If they can customize or personalize that association in any way, the relationship will deepen and become longer lasting.

eNormicom.com is one of the smartest send ups of the dot-commoditization of Web brand identity. Satire by 37 Signals, a smart Web-design firm out of Chicago.

Principle 5: Enable Meaningful Personalization

Of all the jargon Web builders must decipher, personalization is among the most baffling. For the sake of our discussion, we define personalization as the functionality that allows your customer to tailor or modify their experience on your Web site.

Personalization typically requires an investment of the customer's time. It also requires the customer to entrust the business with their personal information, such as credit card numbers, address, and income. They need to be able to trust the business. So your site must have a credible privacy policy if you hope to persuade customers to adopt personalization. Likewise, personalization is costly and difficult to implement, and the payoff is sometimes elusive.

Web designers are confronted by three fundamental questions: Is personalization necessary? What should be customizable? How should personalization be accomplished?

Web designers should recognize that site visitors have tastes and needs that are uniquely related to their personal goals. For example, most mobile phones allow customers to choose custom ring tones. Not just a gee-whiz option, this personalization is meaningful. It helps distinguish your phone calls from others in a room.

MyShoe.com

JOE'S ACCOUNT | MY SIZES | CART | WISH LIST | STORES NEARBY
If you are not Joe, please click here.

Welcome JOE, here is a new shoe recommendation for you:

The Classic
STYLE: DC 1293C
Was: \$185
Joe's Price: \$150

Understated leather buck with a comfortable foot bed lining.

CHOOSE CUSTOM OPTIONS

Joe's Size [dropdown] Leather [radio] Stitch [radio]
Sole Type [dropdown] [radio] [radio]
1 pair [dropdown] [radio] [radio]

ADD TO CART ADD TO WISH LIST

Customers who bought this shoe, also looked at these:

Crescent Workman Classic Polo

Joe's Gift Guide

If you know what Joe likes, you can suggest options.

Product options are explicit personalizations that are easy to choose.

This personalization, popularized by Amazon.com, is perfectly contextual to goals and requires no work. It's also very helpful.

FIGURE 2.12: RELEVANT PERSONALIZATION

Consider the customer experience when choosing which personalization options to offer. Options that are simple and context-sensitive will have the greatest impact.

Designers should allow customers to personalize elements that will be meaningful to their purchasing or selling goals. Personalization that is simple and context-sensitive will help customers be more effective when they revisit a site (See Fig. 2.12). Consider these examples of relevant commerce personalization:

- **Save my buying & shipping preferences**—Good for frequent customers.
 - **Save my buying history**—Good for all customers.
 - **Watch lists**—Good for customers monitoring varying prices, such as stocks, commodities, or auctions.
 - **Product recommendations**—Good for generating awareness of products related to the customer's interest.
 - **Sort list by price, category, or alpha**—Good for search results.
- Customers need to be given a certain amount of personal freedom and control in order to feel secure with a Web site. If a site is too restrictive, your customers may be frustrated and find reaching their goals nearly impossible.

Principle 6: Avoid Fads

Web design has evolved from simple text to advanced multimedia and is poised for a wealth of new possibilities. As with anything concerning aesthetics or style, what's "hot" today will become tomorrow's "tacky." Unfortunately, some Web designers tend to grab onto the hottest new trend, despite its relevance or need.

Why does this happen? The answer is ego. Many design firms do not design for the customer. They design for themselves and their competitors, to say "look what we can do."

A great example of fad is the loathsome animated Flash home page introduction. Very few customers come to a site to watch these ridiculous commercials. They come for information or to conduct a transaction. A Flash intro falls directly in conflict with their goals.

If anything, the leaner years of the dot-com era are forcing companies to do more with less. Simple fixes to navigation can make a big impact on business. As Web-design expert, Jakob Nielsen, reminds us: "The opportunity cost is high from focusing attention on a fad instead of spending the time, money, and management bandwidth on improving basic customer service and usability."⁸

Appropriate graphic design

Graphic design works best when it is appropriate to the customer's goals. In this chapter we have described the elements that add up to an appropriate commerce experience: speed, ease of use, personalization, branding, and consistency. But these parameters merely begin to define the level of graphic depth that is appropriate to the experience.

Mark Hurst, founder and president of Creative Good, is widely credited for popularizing the term "customer experience" and the methodology around it.

Hurst says that it is the experience itself that defines the level of graphic design: "At a banking site, for example, what customer wants to be slowed down by flashy graphics, no matter how 'compelling'? Sites at which customers want to conduct bland transactions as quickly as

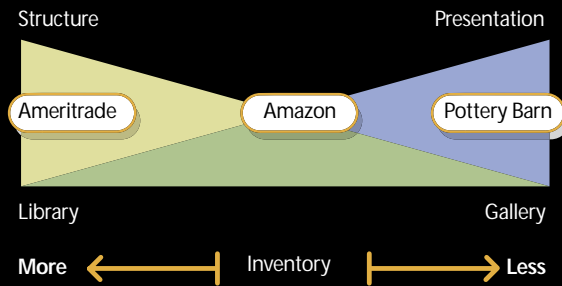


FIGURE 2.13: THE DESIGN CONTINUUM

The balance of form vs. function in web design was best described by Jeffrey Veen in his book *HotWired Style*. Here, we have overlaid the relationship of inventory.

possible will naturally become visually bland and fast and easy! And sites where customers want a more visual experience should and will become more visually compelling.”⁹

The balance of form versus function in Web design was best described by Jeffrey Veen in his 1997 book *HotWired Style: Principles*

of Building Smart Web Sites. Veen makes the point that all Web sites fall somewhere on a spectrum, with structure on one end and presentation on the other (See Fig. 2.13). Highly structured sites focus on pure functionality and information. Sites concerned with presentation focus on style and appearance.

The same holds true for commerce. Banking sites, like Ameritrade or Schwab, are on one end. Catalog sites, like Pottery Barn or J.Crew, are on the other. Most fall in between, like Amazon. In Fig. 2.13, we have overlaid the impact of commerce inventory on Veen’s spectrum. It’s more difficult to have a graphic-intensive design if you have 100,000 products. But if you have only a hundred products, the level of graphic intensity can be high.

Keeping your design appropriate to your visitor’s needs is an excellent jumping off point for entering the first phase of building a commerce Web site: information design. During the information-design phase, you will develop a thorough understanding of your customer, their product inventory and the technology that will be used to build the site.

¹ Zeldman, Jeffrey. “Style vs. Design” Adobe.com. (Aug. 2001), <http://www.adobe.com:80/web/features/zeldman20000821/main.html>

² Bhatti, Bouch, Kuchinsky. “Integrating User-Perceived Quality into Web Server Design” <http://www.w9.org/w9cdrom/92/92.html>

³ Bhatti, Bouch, Kuchinsky. “Integrating User-Perceived Quality into Web Server Design” <http://www.w9.org/w9cdrom/92/92.html>

⁴ Keynote Systems can be found online at <http://www.keynote.com/>

⁵ Nielsen, Jakob, “Did Poor Usability Kill E-Commerce?” Alertbox, Aug. 19, 2001 <http://www.useit.com>

⁶ Miller, George A. “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two.” *The Psychological Review*, 1956, vol. 63, pp. 81–97.

⁷ Jakob Nielsen. Alertbox, May 30, 1999: “Top 10 New Mistakes of Web Design” <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/990530.html>

⁸ Jakob Nielsen. Useit.com Alertbox May 30, 1999, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/990530.html>

⁹ Hurst, Mark. “The Web’s Identity Crisis.” GoodExperience.com, January 21, 2000, <http://www.goodexperience.com/columns/012100identity.html>