

Why Web Sites Should Be Like Screen Plays

By Ted Richards

Web sites are like screen plays to me, requiring a “plot,” dialogue and staging. The plot being, “What is this Web site about...” “Will the lone user overcome the clutter of information and features to accomplish their task or goal?” “Can the user make the right decision and resolve their problem?”

The dialogue is the site narrative and often overlooked in good Web site design. To me a Web site must have a “voice” and characters that narrate information—that talk to the people who use the site! Like your natural voice when talking to friends, a Web voice must *understand* its reader, know their desires and interest before it can strike a familiar easy tone.

The staging is the page design and navigation. Good playwrights anticipate the audience’s interest and know when to cut to the chase. Interactive Web writers must also anticipate the user’s interests and what they want to do next—offering convenient instructions, tips and reminders. The Web writer must drive the direction of the Web design, forcing the design, typography and illustrations to serve the interests of the user.

And like a good play a Web site has several key subliminal issues that must be considered and resolved: “What do you want this Web site to do?” “Who is going to be coming to this Web site and what do they want to accomplish?” “What do you need to provide your end users so they can have a productive, rewarding experience?”

Last, good Web writer style anticipates return visits, and continued engagement offering a friendly, familiar voice and tone that encourages a trusting relationship with the user. A key issue to consider when establishing a friendly relationship is *integrity*. The quality and accuracy of the information you provide establishes trust, and like a good playwright, a conscientious Web writer must be taken at their word.

This "screen play" approach to Web writer style can also be compared with good magazine or newspaper design. Before I began my career in high technology and multi-media, I was a magazine editor and cartoonist. Both magazines and cartoons use a style of graphic design I call *editorial design*. It's a method of design that demands you make the content easy to read, view and browse. Most magazines are designed to be read and viewed—if the readers don't read the magazine, they most likely will not continue their subscription. And a magazine art director who designs a publication that is *not* easy to read will soon be out of a job. A cartoonist who fails to place their dialogue balloons in a good, easy-to-read position, and write their dialogue in a succinct, clear style with a voice and character will not be read and no one will get the joke!

If a Web writer's style employs these creative screen play methods then all of the copy, the interactions and design will have a guiding principle that provides focus, purpose and appeal for what is offered and available to the user. The Web site will have a *voice* and the end result will be a very successful site that delivers a rewarding, memorable user experience.