



DESIGN SERVICES IN THE ERA OF THE WEB

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While most designers have heard of The Web— that pervasive computer network of digital connections— for many, our understanding is still superficial as far as using it to best advantage in business strategies. Just what is this phenomenon and what effect might it have on professional practice?

The Web Imperative

The World Wide Web is nothing more (and nothing less) than an informal collection of computers mutually connected to offer a world wide network of digital connections along which messages can be passed without hindrance. By agreeing to subscribe to a common format for packaging information, computers connected to the Web can share data freely and, most importantly, comprehensibly. The network of systems existed long before recent overzealous reporting started. The important change in recent years was the introduction of a set of freely available tools— Web browsers— which made the accessing of the information significantly easier. Before that, users had to be willing to learn cryptic and esoteric commands to find their way to useful information. With browsers such as Netscape, Mosaic, and others, the experience is more akin to visiting a shopping mall.

Misconceptions

The network of systems consists of servers and clients— that is, computers where information is stored and accessible to visiting users (servers), and computers which can only visit a server (clients). With the explosion of interest and ease of access to the network, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of servers connected to the network and an even more significant increase in the number of users accessing these servers. On the plus side, many institutions have found they have information that can be shared easily and at very little cost. On the other hand, an equal number with information of little value to most also have decided to make their data freely available to all. The Web today is the most substantial collection of data ever accessible at any time in history, and it is growing rapidly. How can a design practice benefit from this overwhelming offering of data?

In the rush to "get on-line", many have not stopped to question the value of their participation. Being a "surfer" in itself has been more important than any specific benefit to be realized, but we are seeing that there are indeed benefits for individual practices and professionals.

The Role of the Web

Design consulting services are increasingly relying on information—the better your information, the better you can serve a client. No architect or engineer would think of practicing without a reasonable library of product information, codes, and similar information. Similarly, the better the information you produce, the more the client can benefit. Information about forthcoming legislation, new construction technologies, and applications of building products are all available on-line. For instance, a full understanding of future legislation affecting your client's business will allow you to proactively address their needs. Also, if you're looking for information about indoor air quality or sustainable building materials, look on-line—there are many sources of detailed information on both of these. While we're not yet sure how well this wealth of new information can assist us in practice, it is clear that the network of systems is already being used beneficially. Listed below are some of the ways to use the Web.

Communication

The first and most common use of the Internet and the Web is communication, one-to-one, through e-mail facilities. As an adjunct to voice mail, some firms use e-mail to contact one another, exchange information, and broadcast messages to many at one time. Since there are many things you cannot exchange through voice mail, firms with offices operating across different time zones use it to send word processing or CADD documents. Additionally, e-mail is considerably cheaper since you don't pay long-distance telephone rates.

Communication to Remote Construction Sites

In addition to interoffice and remote offices, e-mail can be used to communicate with the construction site. Beyond text messages, some users exchange drawing revisions, details, and clarifications digitally, bypassing courier services and time delays incurred by the physical passage of information. As more offices design buildings overseas, this ability to pass graphic information rapidly to the construction site is growing in importance.

Marketing Information

There are two basic ways to obtain marketing information from the Web:

1. You are unlikely to find a want-ad requesting your services on the Web. However, you can use the Web to find background information on your client and on similar projects. The more you know about your client's needs and about the project type, the better prepared you are to secure a commission. For example, to find out more about a federal agency, you can look up <http://www.fedworld.gov>. To learn more about the GSA, look up <http://www.gsa.gov/pubs/dbgsa/dbgsa.htm>.

2. With information from the Web, you can become a real expert in a particular market sector. Increasingly, successful practices are those which have identified a market sector in which they really wish to become a leader in knowledge and expertise. With this proactive marketing strategy, firms are able to claim a market sector for themselves.

Designers Already Online

While the Web is a great source of information for practice, many firms and organizations are beginning to stake out their own presence in this new frontier. Some practices have already set up their own homepages so visitors can find out about who they are. This "doormat" offers passers-by a digital foyer into which they can look as they pass by.

What do these firms hope to accomplish by setting out such doormats? Reasons vary, but seem to fall into two broad categories. Some use the same reasons as explorers throughout history— a desire to establish their presence in an unknown realm in the hope they can help fashion the future. Others use it primarily for communication, as noted above. So far, very few see it as a marketing tool, since it can seem to be a broader version of the yellow pages.

Behind the mystery of the Web, we see a real shift in the professional practice of design. Our field is becoming increasingly reliant on knowledge, more broadly and more fundamentally than before. It is in this capacity that the development of digital communications will affect the way we practice. Tools like the Web may be transient, but it is a precursor of a larger change which is engulfing us all.