

This is the first in a series of brief and informative discussions about the techniques behind design and marketing communications - for both print and web.

Each issue will focus on a particular aspect of delivering effective messages to potential customers.

This quarter – we will discuss web site navigation – perhaps the most critical component of any website and the one important communications tool that is most often handled poorly.

To anchor this discussion, and all that follow – it is important to recognize that your web site is both your corporate identity and your corporate brochure online.

Other functionality can be readily added – but those are the primary reasons for such an investment.

We all recognize the need for strong, relevant design that accurately positions your business.

We suggest that equal weight should be placed on the development of highly effective site navigation.

Your navigation must guide visitors efficiently through your site – but it has another critically important role:

*To realize the maximum benefit from your investment, your site navigation must continuously inform visitors about your full service or product offerings – **leaving nothing to a chance click on an obscure link.***

For effective navigation, we have found that it is important to avoid these commonly used schemes:

- Pop-up menus that disappear when clicked may be clever programming – but are woefully inadequate as useful visitor guidance and information tools. Your “good stuff” is contained in these sub-links – you really want that information to stay in full view so that your visitor can see at a glance your complete range of products or services.
- The “active” link – the one just clicked to get to a particular page of information – must “light-up” and stay lit as a reminder to your visitor. In complex sites it is even more essential to “light up” not just the main section link, but every link in the navigation hierarchy that led to more detailed information in a sub-section or sub-sub-section – no matter how deeply your visitor has drilled down into your service or product offerings.
- Navigation that is broken up into bits and pieces and scattered around your web page only serves to confuse and annoy your visitors.
- Duplicate links to a content section also contribute to visitor confusion – and risks annoying a visitor who is transferred back to content they had previously reviewed – every link in your web site must have a unique and obvious purpose that is useful to a visitor.
- Navigation that is visually different, or not in the exactly same position from page to page is a definite inconvenience for your visitors, causing them to lose focus on your content while they search for a path to the additional information they are seeking.

At Stanford, we firmly believe that well designed web site navigation positions your products and services where they belong – within easy reach of your customers and potential customers – we never want these visitors to work too hard to discover the range and benefits of your products and/or services.