

Ten Mistakes That Can Ruin Your Web Site

By: Fredric Paul

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*"One bad move can turn your world upside down.
It's such a shame 'cause you've been so good up to now. "*

~ Lyle Lovett, "You've Been So Good Up to Now"

No one said it was easy being a Web builder. Challenging, yes. It's even fascinating, rewarding, and lots of other good stuff. But **it's never easy**.

The discipline of building Web sites is still too new, the technology growing up too fast, and the conventions too unsettled for it to be easy. Let's face it, we're all making this up as we go along. And in that kind of chaos, **mistakes come with the territory**.

Of course, some errors are worse than others. And some are easier to excuse than others. To help keep you from making the kind of mistakes that could cancel out all the time, sweat, and talent you've poured into building your Web site, I've compiled this list of **ten blunders you can't afford to make**.

Some of these boo-boos are inexcusable because they're among the few things that *have* been established in the fast-growing world of Web development. Some of them are technical errors; others are marketing faux pas. It really doesn't matter, though: if you see yourself and your site in too many of these situations, you might want to start looking for another job...

Mistake No. 10: Plugging in and tuning out Don't Rely on Plug-ins

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: **plug-ins are not a winning strategy**. No matter how cool the functionality it offers, you're making a big blooper if you rely on a plug-in to deliver essential content, unless everyone has it.

On the other hand, plug-ins can provide extra capabilities for the few who have the proper configuration. The rule is simple: **Don't lock out your audience just to feed your own lust** for the coolest animations, multimedia, and interactivity.

If you simply must use a plug-in, try picking one that most of your audience already has. And no matter how popular the plug-in, you have two obligations:

1. Offer a way for people to **download the plug-in on the spot**; and
2. Provide an **alternative way** to access the content for people who can't (or won't) use the plug-in.

Mistake No. 9: Getting blurry-eyed Don't Confuse Advertising With Content

Amazon.com recently **took a fair amount of flak for selling featured treatment of particular books**--for up to \$10,000 a pop. The giant online bookseller initially defended its practice, saying its editors chose featured books in a way they described as "completely independent" of any special deals. After a few days, though, Amazon apologized, offered refunds, and promised never again to mix advertising and content.

That's great, but it never was only about Amazon.com. The real issue is that **thousands of large and small Web sites don't understand the concept of the separation of content and business**. In many cases, the two are one and the same.

Most credible publishing operations, online and in print (and on TV, too, for that matter) establish distinct lines between the business side of the company and the editorial side. The **editors must be free to be honest and fair**--untainted by the parent company's business relationships.

It's not that a publisher is some noble form of being--many publishing execs have long lusted after the ability to cash in on transactions sparked by their editorial coverage. It's just that in print and on TV, technology limitations make it hard to close the loop between a product review and a purchase.

The Web makes it easy.

Don't be seduced by the easy path. If Web builders allow the Web to become nothing more than a marketing medium, traditional media pundits--and eventually the public--will view our medium as nothing more than an efficient way to deliver junk mail.

Credibility is just as important on the Web as it is anywhere else--maybe more so since it's so often challenged online. So don't give in to the pressure. Make sure your audience knows what parts of your site are unbiased editorial, and what parts are trying to sell them something. **Establishing trust will pay off sooner than you think.**

Mistake No. 8: Hiding the good stuff

Don't Let Advertising Get in the Way of Your Content

For many Web sites, advertising is the primary source of revenue. But people don't come to a site for the advertising; they come for the content or to actually *do* something. Because advertising pays the bills, there's a **powerful temptation to give advertisers special treatment**--even if it gets in the way of what users are coming to the site to get. Common examples include:

- **Oversize ads** that squeeze content into a corner.
- Ad files so large that they significantly **extend the page's download time**, chasing away many people before they even get to the content.
- Java-based and other **high-technology ads that don't work properly** in many browsers and may actually crash some machines.
- **Pop-up ads** that clutter the screen with odd little windows, making it hard to find the content window. (These are a favorite of porn sites.)
- **Interstitial ads** that pop up while the "real" page is loading, slowing downloads, annoying the audience, and cluttering the screen.
- **Too many ads** cluttering the page, lowering the signal-to-noise ratio and making it hard to find the good program amid the commercials.

In the short term, many of these techniques can deliver additional eyeballs to the advertiser, so it's no surprise advertisers are always clamoring for them. But indulging in these kinds of take-the-money-and-run tactics can come back to haunt you if you piss off too many site visitors. If users feel overwhelmed with advertising pitches, they may eventually decide to visit a calmer competitor, forcing you to let even louder advertising strategies keep your advertisers happy as your traffic gradually declines.

You may even have to say "no" to some advertisers to keep the noise level from driving away readers your other, more rational advertisers are paying to reach. Reputable advertisers and agencies are already figuring out that screaming, flashing ads turn off Web visitors and are not insisting on them.

Doing it right is difficult, though, requiring you to walk a thin line between keeping your business viable and pleasing your audience--even as advertising standards continually shift along with the technology. But not paying attention to this issue can mean slow suicide for your site.

Mistake No. 7: Getting sloppy

Don't Get Careless

There's a popular school of thought that contends that details don't matter on the Web. Adherents to this approach believe that online, speed is everything. Do it fast, they say, and fix it later if you absolutely must.

They're wrong. Sure, speed is important online. But it's not the only thing. **You've got to be fast *and* careful.**

One of the best things about the Web is that it lets even the little guys look like big guys. If two companies each put together a slick Web site, the audience cannot tell the Fortune 500 outfit from an ambitious start-up.

But the reverse is also true: When you put up a dumpy little site riddled with errors, even giant multinational corporations can come off looking small-time. Because it's so easy to put up a Web site, **every site is vulnerable to being dismissed as a fly-by-night operation** unless it consistently dots its *i*'s and crosses its *t*'s.

So, take a couple extra minutes and **copyedit the text** of your site. Spell-check it and proofread it, too. Beta-test your applications before you put them on your public site. Have someone dedicated to quality assurance. Otherwise, all your development efforts may come to naught, as your intended audience casually dismisses your site because of a few silly mistakes.

Mistake No. 6: Growing old Don't Leave Stale Content Lying Around

No matter how good your Web site's content is, few people are going to read it more than once. If you want people to come back to your site, **you have to give them a reason to come back *now***--and not just whenever they get around to it. If there's no urgency to what's new on your site, they may *never* get around to it.

That means you have to **add new content to your site on a regular basis**--continually if possible, daily if you can marshal the resources, but as regularly as your means will allow. At the very least, establish a schedule so that your audience gradually learns when new content is added, and when they should check in. Even if it's monthly, a schedule will at least tickle people's memory that maybe it's time to check back.

Better still, **establish multiple schedules**. Newspapers have long been smart about this, and you can learn from their example. If you set schedules for adding new content in particular areas, you can train people when to visit for new stuff that appeals to them. This approach is far better than having users come back and find that none of your new content happens to relate to them that day.

In newspapers, a typical weekly lineup might devote Mondays to technology, Tuesdays to finance, Wednesdays to food, Thursdays to the home, and Fridays to the weekend's entertainment choices. That won't make sense for most Web sites, but you get the idea.

Mistake No. 5: Kissing and telling Don't Share Private Information

Taking proper care of the information you gather from your audience isn't just a good idea, it's good business. No less a player than IBM, the Web's second biggest advertiser, recently announced it would no longer advertise on sites unless they have a posted privacy policy.

Privacy policies typically stipulate what information the site will collect from visitors--via cookies, registration processes, or various transactions--and **how that information will be used or sold**.

But even if your company never expects to earn a nickel from Big Blue advertising, posting--and following--a privacy policy is a good business practice. Sure, you may be able to scam a few short-term dollars by kiss-and-tell marketing, but **Web surfers aren't stupid**. If they find out you've done them wrong by spreading their personal info around the Web, they will not be happy. Not only will they avoid your site like the plague that it is, but they'll go out of their way to warn their friends and colleagues. And on email this kind of bad news travels almost as fast as the Melissa virus.

Don't think you can hide your unsavory practices either. As more and more sites wise up and adopt privacy policies, those that refuse to play by the rules will stand out even more clearly. That's a situation in which you don't want to find yourself. Basically, **we're just talking about being honest** here. Is that too much to ask?

Mistake No. 4: Clogging the pipe

Don't Clog the Pipes

Try to remember that you're a Web builder, and you probably have a better Internet setup than the vast majority of your site's audience. That's OK, but you **can't let your fast connection lead you to the false assumption that all surfers share this high-speed bounty.** They don't.

Just because your site works fine for you on your fancy dedicated T3 doesn't mean that it's a positive, practical experience in the real world. For the great unwashed hordes of dial-up Web surfers, all those giant graphics, deluxe animations, and exciting videos are mostly experienced as pages waiting to load. They don't see the cool stuff; they just see the exasperating gray bar inching back and forth at the bottom of the browser window. Because they may not even know what's coming, **they may well decide it's not worth it and click away.** Heck, I'll bet you've done exactly that more than a few times yourself.

Unless you're specifically targeting an audience you know to be equipped with fat pipes (on a corporate intranet, say, although you still have to watch out for those pesky executives trying to dial in from their laptops), **try to keep the high-bandwidth stuff to a minimum.** (Better still, offer separate services for high-bandwidth users. They'll appreciate the cool stuff, and your dial-up users will appreciate not having to wait for it to download.)

Design your HTML so visitors see at least something as they wait for the high-bandwidth stuff to load. Test your site with a 28.8 modem (yes, millions of people still use 'em, even if the newbies all got 56K modems with their \$899 PCs). And be honest about the results--keeping in mind that most people don't have the same emotional attachment to your site that you do.

Mistake No. 3: Getting caught

Don't Try to Trap Your Audience on Your Site

The latest buzzword sweeping the Web is *stickiness*, which is loosely defined as a **site's ability to keep visitors hanging around rather than losing them to other sites.** It's good to be sticky, the theory goes, because the longer you keep visitors on your site the more advertisements you can show them, and the more stuff you can try to sell them.

I have no quarrel with "sticky." The more enticements--in terms of content, applications, or whatever--you can offer visitors to make them want to stay on your site, the better. But **some sites take the notion of stickiness into the realm of Super Glue,** attempting to hold visitors on the site at all costs. These sites try to pretend the rest of the Web simply doesn't exist.

This kind of transparent attempt to **lock your audience onto your site simply doesn't work.** The users' URL bar and bookmarks are always right there at the top of the browser. If people don't find what they're looking for on your site, they're going to leave, and there's really not much you can do about it. The Net makes it easy to leave one site for another. You can't fight it, so use it.

Here's an idea: If your site can't provide everything users might need--and no site can--why not help them find it, no matter where it is? If you don't help them reach their goal, they're not going to come back to your site. But if you do **help them succeed in their search,** even if they end up on someone else's site, they just might remember how they found it and come back the next time they're looking for something.

And that gives you another chance to entice them with what you actually *do* have on your site--another chance to be sticky, if you will.

Mistake No. 2: Getting lost

Don't Complicate Navigation

Just because *you* know where everything is on your site, you're dreaming if you think navigating your site is equally easy for your audience. In many cases, just the opposite is true. And unless you make it easy for visitors to find the information they want, there's really not much point in having the information available in the first place.

So what can you do?

- **Avoid ambiguous or misleading links.** If visitors don't know where a link goes, they're unlikely to click it just to find out. Spend four to seven words to clearly label where each link goes and what people will find on the other end, and you'll make your users much happier.
- Consider using **JavaScript rollovers** to provide additional information on links.
- **Do usability testing.** To make sure you're not building an unsolvable maze, test your site with typical end users, not just Web builders.
- Emphasize what's important. **Don't bury your most critical content.** Figure out what users want most and make sure that it's the most prominent feature on your site. And don't forget to track your traffic and ask your users to make sure you know what they *really* care about.
- **Organize your site according to what users want to know**, and not just to your company's internal organization. Your users don't care whether a particular piece of information was developed by your company's marketing department or by someone in business development--so don't organize your content along those lines.
- **Offer navigation alternatives.** No matter how carefully you design a navigation scheme, you can't count on everyone figuring it out. So, it's a good idea to employ multiple navigation principles, thereby increasing the odds that site visitors will be able to figure out at least one way to successfully find what they're looking for.

Mistake No. 1: Leaving the party Don't Give Up

If at first you don't succeed...you must be working on the Web. But you *must* keep trying. The Web is a new medium, and nobody has the rules figured out yet. The ten mistakes outlined here hardly scratch the surface of all the ways a Web site can go wrong. There are an **infinite number of Web mistakes to make**, and just about everyone makes them. In fact, it sometimes seems like our successes are little more than fortunate accidents.

The key, as usual, is not to be afraid to fail. Instead, learn from your mistakes and **do it better the next time**. And when that fails, do it even better the third time. The Web is evolving so quickly that you may never get it all the way right. But if you're getting better all the time, you're gaining an insurmountable lead on the Web builders who haven't yet begun to try. And you could even move ahead of the IPO-bloated fat cats, who thought they got it right the first time and are now busy resting on their laurels.

Microsoft, as has often been noted, has gotten rich and powerful by consistently blowing its first two tries at almost everything. Just about all Microsoft products were virtually unusable until at least version 3.0; Windows and Internet Explorer are the most visible examples of this continuing phenomenon. **But the folks up in Redmond are nothing if not persistent**, and, at some point, they start getting things right. And suddenly their failures don't seem to matter anymore.

Fortunately, though, **the Web is an even more iterative medium than software**--or print publishing for that matter. So, if you completely blew your first try, buckle down and try again. And if you think you nailed it, that's even more reason to try again. Even successful sites need to relaunch on a regular basis.

If you need inspiration, consider that once you replace it, version 1.0 of your site becomes no more than a memory. Trust me, once you do succeed, the sting of your early failures will begin to recede.

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