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Bad Websites: Top 10 (OK, 11) Warning Signs

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It seems that anyone can build a website these days. There are lots of 'Learn HTML in 10 minutes' or 'Flash for Fools' types of books on the shelves, and people are falling for the trap that this stuff is easy. Well, almost.

'Website building' skills are like chess skills: easy to learn the basics, and then a lifetime to master the intricacies, subtleties and strategies that make a player a world champion.

After many years (since 1999) of specializing in creating great websites and website makeovers, we've found several common mistakes that novice website developers make. We'd like to share that list with you, gentle reader, and also offer some tips on how to address each problem.

Take a look at the list, and then run a check against your own website.

1. An untitled website – what a royal pain! A missing or bad TITLE tag
2. A missing or bad DESCRIPTION meta-tag
3. Java, Javascript or Flash-based menus, without a text-based menu as well
4. Hidden menus – let's play Memory
5. Flash intro without an HTML 'SKIP INTRO'
6. You've Been Framed!
7. It just keeps going and going: Animated GIFS, scrolling text, blinking text
8. MIDI/WAV (or any) music that cannot be turned off
9. Non-optimized photos
10. Textured background (oh starry nights!)
11. BONUS: Pop-Up, Under or Over ads!!!

Now, if you're creating and maintaining your own website, congratulations on your hard work so far! Hopefully, our tips and ideas here will help you create an even greater website. If you paid someone else to develop your website, and it exhibits these problems, well... you might want to give us a call – we can help!



So, let's get down to it, shall we? In Part I of this article, we'll cover the first five items on our list of 'Bad Website Tip-Offs', and offer easy solutions to fix or work around the problem. In Part II (separate article), we'll finish off the rest of the list.

1. An untitled site – A missing or bad TITLE tag

Take a look at the very top of your browser the next time you visit your website. What does it say in the windows bar (above the File, Edit, View menu)? That's where your website TITLE should be.

Does it say **Untitled Document**? Or perhaps your web address (www.yourwebsite.com)? Or maybe 'Welcome to our Website'? How about 'index' or 'Home'? These are all common mistakes that people make when creating web pages, and it's so easily fixed!

Inside your web pages is a special code (or tag) named **Title**, and here is where you want to put a short (8-10 words) description of your company's products or services. Why? A few reasons:

1. When people visit your website, they get another indicator of what your website is about.
2. When search engines visit your website, they look at the Title tag to tell them what the website is about (among other things)
3. When search engines display search results, they usually use the Title tag as the short description that you as a searcher would click on.
4. When people bookmark your website, that's the text they see when they look in their Favorites list.

So, it makes a lot of sense to make your Title tag as descriptive as possible, but yet not too many words, since it will be truncated by browsers and search engines anyway. Our Title is '*Great website design, development and programming is now Within Reach*', and it helps reinforce what we do to both visitors and search engines.



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2. A missing or bad DESCRIPTION meta-tag

You may have heard about Meta-Tags, those near-mythical beasts that are supposed to propel you to the top of the search engine rankings. Well, they don't. Or more correctly, the one everyone THINKS will work does not, and the one many people ignore will definitely help if done right.

Meta Tag Keywords are useless! Almost no search engine uses them because so many unscrupulous webmasters have packed the Keyword tag with unrelated words and phrases, hoping to draw traffic to their sites. For example, they'll put 'Britney Spears' (a very popular search phrase) in the meta tag area, in hopes of attracting Britney traffic, even if they sell garden hoses! Anyone selling you on Meta Tags Keywords is selling snake oil. You can read more about this topic in our other article about Search Engine Positioning, on our website.

Meta Tag Description is another matter. While it is also a piece of hidden code on your website (site visitors never see the meta tags – they don't display on screen), search engines do use the description tag (which should be a short sentence 12-15 words) to help them figure out what your website is about. The Description tag is also used as the clickable summary in a search engine result when the TITLE tag is unavailable or blank. So this tag is important to your overall search engine placement.

Just be sure to make it relevant to your website content! If the Title, Description and content do not match up, then your website's rankings will suffer, as the search engine will not know how to position your website pages. When they are all in synch, they give your page a multiplied boost in rankings!



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3. Java, Javascript or Flash-based menus

In keeping with our search engine support theme, we'll now take a look at funky menus. In the never-ending quest for the 'kewlest' website, novice webmasters fall in love with the mouse rollover effects that Flash or Java-based menus can provide. Javascript menus allow for complex menu capabilities, like drop downs and fly-outs (just like Windows itself).

That's all well and good, but search engine robots are not that bright, and they cannot figure out how to navigate your website and find the other pages when they encounter a flash, java or complex javascript menu. They simply stop, because they think they've hit a blind alley. Also, these complex menus also stop folks with disabilities.

There is a very easy, and often overlooked solution to this problem. Keep your fun menu at the top of your page, but put the same menu, as pure text links, at the bottom of every page. You've seen these menus at the bottom of many websites (they're usually slightly smaller text, so as to be available, yet unobtrusive). Search engines can read all-text menus, and then can follow all the links on your website. People with disabilities are now able to navigate your website as well. And you still get to keep your 'kewl' menu! What fun!



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4. Hidden menus – let's play Memory!

While on the subject of Flash menus, there's a type of menu that should never be deployed – the hidden menu. Now why would someone put a 'hidden' menu on their page – isn't that a paradox? (for answer, see 'kewl menu' above...)

The hidden menu is usually done by a newbie programmer who learned how to hide and show objects, or wants to be sophisticated and clever. It usually manifests as a small square or other object (or maybe the word 'menu') that, if you realize you can and must click it, unfolds into the website menu itself. The other variation on this theme is a menu with just graphics, but no text to indicate what each menu option holds.

Either version means your visitor must work very hard to remember where content is on your website. Click and hunt, where was 'Services'? Under here? No, maybe here? Howabout this one? Oh, here it is! Is that any way to treat your visitors? Forcing them to play Memory or Hide The Menu – what's the point of that!? A website is supposed to deliver information, not headaches and confusion.

The cure for this is to throttle back on the self-serving cleverness quotient, and offer "easy to understand at a glance" navigation for your website visitors. They in turn will offer you their repeat business. Play 'hide the menu' and your visitors will play 'hide the cash' with you!



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5. Flash intro without a simple ‘SKIP INTRO’

While we’re on the subject of Flash, we’d like to point out a common mistake with a super-simple solution. Flash intros, when done well, can be a valuable ‘mood setter’ or ‘pre-show show’ for your website. But so many first-time Flash developers forget one simple premise: not everyone wants to see their spinning logo, techno-track enabled Flash intro.

So, add a Skip Intro to all your Flash intros, and that should be the end of this problem, right? Almost. Too many people fall into the trap of putting the ‘Skip Intro’ button into the Flash movie itself. The problem here is that if the Flash movie does not load quickly, or at all, the visitor is forced to sit through part of the load process (delaying their entry into the website) or worse, forced to look at a blank screen, with no way of getting past the gatekeeper.

The simple solution is to create a ‘Skip Intro’ link outside of the Flash movie, as a basic HTML link to the next page you want them to see. Visitors will see that link almost immediately, as the HTML portion of the intro page will load first, then call the Flash. If the visitor wishes to skip the intro, there’s almost no delay, no gatekeeper, and no loss of traffic. Aren’t you glad you didn’t skip this tip?



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6. You've Been Framed!

Frames are a method used to develop websites, where the developer 'slices' the website into pieces (the header, the menu, the content area) and each piece is loaded into its own 'frame' in the browser. You've probably seen a framed website when you can scroll a portion of the web page (usually the content) while another section (usually the menu and/or the head or logo area) remains in the browser even when you scroll. You think – 'hey, this is neat! The navigation never goes away, so I don't have to scroll back to pick a new page.' That's true enough, and frames were all the rage back in 1999.

What is much harder to see is that frames wreak havoc with search engine positioning, and even simple bookmarking. If your website uses frames, try to navigate to a specific page of content, and then bookmark the page (save it to your Favorites). Now, leave the website, and click on the bookmark in your Favorites folder. You're taken back to the home page, not the page you marked! Why? Because the browser only sees the homepage of the website, which defines the frames themselves. Each frame pulls its own content in, and the illusion is complete.

Search engines also have a hard time with framed sites, because when they index a content page, and someone later finds that content page in a search directory, the page will come up, but without its surrounding frames (the logo, the navigation, the menu), so the page will be 'naked' and the visitor will have no way of exploring the rest of your website!

If this seems a little complicated, that's because it is. There is no quick fix for this problem – the website would need to be re-written without frames, so that all pages had the menu and/or header and/or whatever other frame content was not on the main info pages. Sorry – no magic pixie dust available.



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7. Animated GIFS, scrolling text, blinking text

Too many times, beginner website developers feel that the more blinking lights and spinning logos they can pack on the page, the better it will be. Actually, the opposite is true – keep it clean and simple.

Does your web page blink, scroll or spin in any way? Is there a piece of artwork that repeats its little animated heart out over and over (usually it's an 'Email Me' graphic of some sort). Has your website become much too festive? It's time to cut back and simplify.

Blinking text serves no purpose. If you want it to be noticed, bold it or use a different color for the font.

Scrolling text (like news tickers) is also annoying, in that you force the visitor to work at your pace, not theirs. If I see the tail end of a news item, but not the beginning, I am forced to wait for the entire cycle to rescroll to find out if the tidbit is of true interest, or not. That slows me down as I wait, distracts me from the rest of your message, and ticks me off when it turns out not to be relevant – overall, a bad experience. Instead, create a what's new page, with non-scrolling info that I can browse and click at my convenience.

Animated GIFs are the last bugaboo I want to chase off your website. Animation is a great way to attract someone's attention and drag their eyes around the screen. But mindlessly repeated animation loops only work once, and then distract, and annoy, your visitors.

Instead, replace that mindless never ending loop with a simple Flash animation that plays once or twice, then sits still. Perhaps it will play itself every 20 or 30 seconds – far enough apart not to annoy or confuse, yet repetitive enough that visitors will eventually notice it.



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8. MIDI/WAV (or any) music that cannot be turned off

Ever get stuck on a website that blared music at you, with no warning? And then, you look for a volume control or off switch, and there is none – your reduced to scrambling for the volume control on your speakers while your co-workers are wondering what your up to!

That's just plain rude behavior (the loud music, not the scrambling!) and is so easy to fix. Yet so many beginners think – 'Hey, let's add a soundtrack to our website!' So they add a WAV or MIDI formatted pieced of music (two popular ways that sounds are stored on a computer), and force the music on a visitor.

Aside from the lack of volume control, this also means a large music file needs to download when a page is loaded, which slows access to your website to a crawl.

Better choice: create a small Flash-based music player (either one song, or a whole jukebox) and let the player download alone (it can be made very small). Then, if a visitor wants some tunes, they can click and select from the small player you created, which in turn will grab the music when it is requested! Now that's music to my ears!



9. Non-optimized photos

Speaking of long download times, how many of you optimize your photos and images before you put them on your website? What's optimization, you say? It's the process of making the image as small in filesize as possible (smaller filesize = faster download) while still maintaining a certain level of clarity and crispness. This is usually done through compression, which almost any image editing software will do, if asked nicely.

Too many times, I have visited websites where the images are scanned in lifesize or photos are dumped directly from the digital camera to the web. Beginner web designers don't realize the images are so large, because they seem to appear instantly when testing the website on their own machines. Well, of course they do – they're already 'downloaded' to your hard drive! And to make matters worse, a lot of drag and drop website software will allow you to place an image on a web page without optimizing it. The image may 'look' small, but all you really did was 'virtually' resize it with web code (HTML), not actually resize it with proper compression and optimization.

The key here is to learn how to use your graphics software (PhotoShop, Paint Shop Pro, Fireworks, anything that edits images), apply the proper amount of compression and select the proper resolution.

JPG compression is as much art as science – there is no set value that works for all images. Play around with the compression settings, and look for the best combination of compression percentage (higher percentage means 'less' compression) and clarity – If you apply too much compression, the image will become very blocky or blurry.

As far as resolution, be sure to resample all images to 72 d.p.i. (dots per inch). Monitors cannot support anything higher anyway, so all that extra info is wasted space (and longer download times). By way of comparison, scanners usually scan at 300 dpi or higher. That's OK, scan at the higher resolutions, just be sure to resample to 72 dpi when you're ready to put that image on the web.

With careful planning, compression and resolution changes, you can achieve huge savings in file size (and subsequent bandwidth / transmission costs) for your website. Smaller sizes mean faster downloads, and faster downloads means a more responsive and customer-friendly website. That almost always turns into higher profits, as people stick around to see your info and don't click away while they wait for an image that will never appear!



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10. Textured background (oh starry nights!)

This last tip is so easy to implement (and avoid) that it's almost frightening how often we encounter it. We're talking about those textured or graphic backgrounds on websites that make the content virtually impossible to read. Usually, it's a field of stars, or a cloudy/blue sky, or flowers, or even bricks! The image is wallpapered onto the website pages, and the content becomes unreadable because the text gets lost in the colors of the graphic. Light or dark text doesn't seem to matter, since either one gets swallowed up by the wallpaper.

The solution is simple – don't use an image in the background of your web pages. Or, if you must, make sure your text is readable on top of the wallpaper. Some images won't work, as is, no matter what color text you try. This is because the image itself has so much contrast within its colors – they're all over the spectrum.

If you want to use an image as a background, either fade it out, to the point where it becomes a watermark, or darken it to where it's almost a shadow of itself. This created a low contrast image, and then you can find a text color that complements the low-contrast background (if the image is faded to white, a dark color text will usually work, and vice versa).



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BONUS: Popups, Unders and Overs

In a word – please **stop** using them.

They're visual spam, and only serve to distract and annoy your visitors. Imagine if you walked into a store, and the clerks handed you flyers as you walked in the door, out the door, and up and down every aisle. Pretty darn annoying, no? Would you go back? I sure wouldn't.

So why is it suddenly OK to do it to your website visitors? It's not – it reeks of desperation. "Please, PLEASE, look at this special offer – if you don't buy NOW, we'll be out of business!!" Not someplace I want to establish a long-term relationship with.

And it confuses a lot of people who don't realize that extra windows are popping up all over. Instead, put your specials in a well-created graphic on your home page (or every page). Write compelling copy, and draw visitors to your specials by offering them all the great benefits of your products or services.

If you're so desperate for advertising revenue from these third-party services, you should probably not be in business, as your own services are not compelling enough. Take your website out back and put it out of its misery, and then call in a professional website development firm, who will craft a website that informs, entertains and drives sales to you, all without those damn pop-ups!

Wrap-up

Well, that's it – our tour of ten (ok, eleven) common mistakes amateur web developers make, and how to fix them, easily and effectively. If any of these seemed too esoteric or difficult to implement, feel free to give us a call (1.888.948.4467), and we'll be glad to discuss your options and how we can help you develop a great website!