

5 people who should never design your website, and how to manage them

Everybody seems to be an expert when it comes to web design. If you are tasked with maintaining or redesigning your website, then be warned: everyone will have an opinion, and most will insist that their opinion is correct.

 By [Dylan Kohlstadt](#) 23 Sep 2011

Most people tend to think that the way they use a website, is the way all people use it. I think it's human nature to think that way. Someone once said that there are as many opinions in a room as there are backsides, or perhaps he used another term!

In general, there are 5 types of people to watch out for when designing your website.

1. Emphatic Opinionators - usually your boss

These people really do think that their way is the right way. They are usually fairly egocentric and they are usually your boss! They will tell you that the sign-up button needs to be bigger, and in red, and in the centre of the page. Unfortunately, they are usually very hard to dissuade. Not only because they pay your salary and conduct your performance review, but because they will only be persuaded by unquestionable facts. If you let them have their way, your user might feel forced into doing something they're not yet comfortable with.

The strategy: Try to anticipate their suggestions (by now you should know they will ask for that infernal button) by researching thought leaders' opinions, white papers, and back up what you're saying with as many facts as you can scrape together. Google analytics will provide you insight into how your users interact with your website, and usability testing will show you where your customers are actually clicking to sign up. Usually it's an obscure link in the footer and not the obvious button flashing at fit-inducing speed.

2. Hardcore salespeople - i.e. the marketing or product manager

People who have something to sell always want preference on your home page. They believe that their promotion is the hook that will sway the hesitant visitor, and persuade them to become loyal customers. They usually want the latest sale up in a big orange block with a flashing 'click here' button. Or they want to clutter up your site with lengthy copy informing customers about the latest widget. If you let them design your website, they will cause your user to feel overwhelmed by the options available, unless you're a low-cost supermarket of course.

The strategy: For these people seeing is believing: try to get them to sit in on your usability testing and hear what your customers are saying. Try to arrange a monthly session where you show them excerpts from videos taken whilst user testing. The fact they will find hard to believe is that, in nearly all eye tracking studies done, big bold banners on your website are nearly always ignored.

Why? Users fear where the link will take them, and that they won't be able to find their way back. Another thing to point out to them is that people don't read! If they do, they will scan, so keep copy short, to the point and strongly benefits-led.

3. Large groups of people - usually committees:

Aaah, the committee. You've probably seen it: large groups of people huddled around A3 colour printouts urgently scribbling their comments in the margins, and loudly proclaiming their opinions for all to marvel at. The committee is your toughest opponent yet, because there are so many of them, and if you manage to get a word in someone will feel obliged to refute it. I guess everyone just wants to feel like they're making a contribution. If you let them design your site, they will take a bit from each of the design concepts and have you merge them into a collage that will make your graphic designer head for the door.

The strategy: Listen carefully, note everything down that is being raised, and afterwards, in private you can talk with each person and talk them through why their suggestion is perhaps not ideal for what you're trying to achieve, and why. The best thing is to avoid 'design by committee' in the first place! Get everyone's input, then get the project owner to sign the project off (after extensive iterative user testing) and then take it to Beta.

4. Visually Inclined - typically graphic designers and fancy advertising agencies

Graphic designers are capable of designing work that is beautiful to behold, but not necessarily easy to navigate. They will fight you on things like font size - for them smaller is better; using fancy text with effects that make your website heavy and Google can't index; and they enjoy adding big flash blocks filled with moving animation - that Google doesn't like and users don't like either. If you're a restaurant chain, they might create a beautiful kitchen for your home page, eschewing the traditional static navigation bar for something far more interesting. Unfortunately, customers don't find it that interesting after spending what feels like an hour searching through the site trying to find their closest store.

The strategy: Create a clear wireframe of what you believe is best, you can draw it by hand on paper to start with (paper prototyping), or even use PowerPoint. Show this to as many people as you can that don't work in your department (finance or HR are great for this sort of thing), refine it until your 'surrogate customers' know exactly where they are, and what they need to do. Then hand this in with your brief to the agency. Once they've placed the creative design over the wireframe, start your user testing from scratch.

5. Technically Proficient - the company's web developers and programmers

Technical folk are an interesting bunch. They usually know your systems back to front, and should be consulted on your website early on as they always pick up issues or raise ideas that are useful in the process, but should they be left to design your user's web experience? No, but they often are.

What tends to happen is that whoever briefed in the website forgot to design the boring bits, like error messaging, or validation messages. They also often forget to provide the developer with a flow diagram or technical brief. So the developer is left the unenviable task of filling in the blanks, which usually means they will design a DOS-style pop up, and write copy filled with technical terms and three letter acronyms, leaving your customer baffled.

The strategy: Involve your techies early on, get their input and incorporate their feedback in the wireframe. Sit with a developer and design the flow diagram together, they know better than you what it should contain and what wording to use. If the project is particularly tricky, include a technical brief that has a step-by-step guide with screenshots and functional requirements.

Now that they're out of the equation, who SHOULD design your website? The person who should design your website is a user experience (UX) specialist. They will work with the above five people, gather all business and customer requirements, wireframe the design, identify surrogate users, test it with users, refine the design, send it for technical input and creative design, test again, refine again and finally, after coding and testing, make it live in a beta environment. This is probably the least painful way to design a website, it might take a little longer initially, but will reduce time spent changing the site after you make it live.

It all boils down to one thing: don't let opinion direct your website's design. You need to use cold, hard facts. These are simple enough to garner using web analytics and usability testing. And remember, there seems never be enough time to get it right the first time, but there always seems to be enough time to redo it!

ABOUT DYLAN KOHLSTÄDT

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