

Home page etiquette

On the web you have 20 seconds or less to grab your visitors' attention. And that all-important first impression made by your home page could be key to the success of your whole web site.

So, does your home page welcome visitors to your business with open arms or give them the cold shoulder?

I've listed some of the features that will engage your visitors interest, build their confidence in your site and entice them in to read on. Of course, your particular home page may not need to do every one of these things. However, you know that the more boxes you tick, the harder your home page will be working for you.

How welcoming is your home page?

Is it approachable?

An effective home page is user-friendly and smoothes the way for your visitors to explore further:

- Does it look easy to use? Are the links obvious and does the layout follow generally accepted conventions? For example, links are in familiar positions, in a colour and/or underlined; sections have familiar headings such as 'about us' and 'contact us'. If it looks easy to use, then it probably is easy to use.
- Does it manage visitors expectations? The links and text on the home page can show how much content there is likely to be in the site. Does it look like a 5 page site or a 500 page site? For example, a search box suggests a big site of 100 pages or more.
Is there an invitation to action? Be upfront about what you want your visitors to do. If you want them to call you; join your mailing list; bookmark your site or buy from it, then make that clear.
- Is it accessible by users with disabilities? Make sure that it follows accessibility guidelines.

Does your home page entice visitors into your web site?

- Does it explain what your visitors will gain from exploring your site? Tell them succinctly how your site will help them to save money, increase profits, win new business, and so on (they will benefit won't they?).

Will your home page reassure visitors that they have come to the right place?

- Does it get straight to the point? Tell your visitors exactly what your site is about with a one sentence 'tag-line', at or near the top of the page (N.B. this is not your mission statement or a marketing slogan).
- Does it establish your credibility? Are there customer endorsements, accreditations, professional associations and, importantly, a bricks and mortar address and phone number that reassures visitors that this site belongs to a genuine, established business.
- Does it make the right impression? Is the graphic styling and copywriting appropriate for your target market? Are you speaking their language?

Does your home page look fresh and lively?

- Are there elements that show that it is up-to-date? News snippets, announcements, events and other current, dated material lets visitors know that they can trust the information in the site to be fresh. (It is up-to-date, isn't it?).
- Does it show second-time visitors what's new? A simple 'what's new' section will make it easy for them to spot anything that may have changed since their last visit (if nothing has changed then they may not come back a third time).

Is your home page smart and professional?

- Is it well groomed? Check the spelling and grammar, make sure that all the links work and that the text is all formatted consistently.

Does your home page treat your visitors with respect? Show them that you understand that their time is valuable:

- Does your home page display quickly and free from error messages? If it is too slow then many people will be pressing the back button before they've even seen it. Make sure that your site is tested on a range of systems and access speeds.
- Does your home page appear first? Avoid animated Flash intro pages or anything that comes between your visitors and your home page. Both people and search engines prefer to get straight to the point. If you must have a Flash intro, then put a 'skip intro' link on it (and monitor your visitor stats to see how many people actually watch it).

Remember:

You already know how important first impressions are in building business relationships. Make sure that your web site welcomes your visitors with open arms and respects their needs, just as you would do in person.