



**Strategic Web Design:  
Creating An Online Brand**  
*- By Christina Cheney*

# Strategic Web Design: Creating An Online Brand

Imagine a marketing tool which invites, informs and impresses your customers while extending your brand. A tool which not only promulgates the best you have to offer to the widest audience but one which can perform functions and even automate back office procedures.

Every business, large and small, has the opportunity to build such a tool at this very moment. The web is an open frontier for women business owners. As one of the fastest growing segments in America, women business owners need efficient, flexible and measurable business tools to keep them one step ahead of the competition. Businesses are only just now realizing the power and efficiency that a website can bring almost instantaneously. However, in order to be truly effective, a website needs to be strategically tailored and designed from the ground up.

## Your Brand is Your Story

Branding is the core message and personality of a company. It is a synthesis of a company's products and services, but more importantly it is a story. This story is communicated by imagery, slogans, attitude, familiarity and awareness. It is the voice of a company with all its subtleties and permutations. Like a voice, it is a communications system in and of itself defined by words, tone, choice of adjectives, inflection, eye contact and body language. All of these elements combine to engage or disengage the audience. This level of mind share from the target audience translates

to brand awareness, market share and customer loyalty.

Branding is especially powerful on the web because it connects on a one-to-one basis with a broad user base. If done right, your brand will



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be supported and reinforced throughout the website, not only by visual use and placement of your company identity, but in the layout, graphics and the tone of the content.

## Build It and They Will Come

With all the media hype during the frenzied technology craze of the mid-1990's, large companies with established brands rushed onto the web. They contributed enormously to the acceptability of the web as a business platform. However, they

had no idea how to extend their brand onto the web. In fact, they often damaged their brands instead of enhancing them. This was primarily due to lack of a strategic approach to web design as an integral part of their business. As a result the digital brand of many companies, still today, are poorly executed on the web.

Branding on the web is much more than splashing ad banners

across search/portal sites, such as Yahoo! or Excite. Ad banners are probably the worst form of web promotion and have already become an anathema to web users. Branding is an extension of everything your company has to offer, creatively presented to targeted audience segments.

## Get It Right the First Time

A website is especially important for small companies. A company needs to identify its mission and values with a compelling brand

emotion. A company's brand is its most important interface with its customers, partners, vendors, investors and the press. Developing the branding and marketing message right the first time is crucial because the brand immediately begins inheriting awareness, association and meaning.

### **Kick Start Your Start-Up**

A strategically designed website allows a start-up company to perform a number of critical, necessary and interrelated tasks in tandem:

- *Develop brand and identity*
- *Reach target audience at minimal cost*
- *Develop marketing collateral which can be leveraged into other media (print, etc.)*
- *Increase and retain web traffic*
- *Automate back office procedures (forms, surveys, etc.)*
- *Test product ideas and designs (online focus groups)*
- *Entice potential clients for a call-to-action*
- *Enhance communications with potential customers*

### **Four Critical Steps to Strategic Web Design**

1. The first step is to examine your business proposition from a strategic point of view. This makes the web development process a part of your overall business strategy.
2. Then, identify your target audience through building user profiles. This is critical if you want an online brand that appeals to your customers.
3. Distill your goals and objectives into key documents. Armed with this comprehensive understanding of what you are about to

embark upon, you can now use these strategic briefs to define your online brand and begin the actual site design.

4. In the design phase, extrapolate these summary understandings into comprehensive design. This requires a synthesis of design metaphors, user interface, visual architecture, content pacing and technical implementation.

In my experience I have found repeatedly, that this set of exercises alone give my clients a much clearer sense of their business proposition and how to best leverage their brand on the web. It also results in a site which brings highly measurable results to you and your customers.

### **Information Design**

An easy to navigate and aesthetically pleasing environment is especially important on the web where information overload creates frustration for busy people with high expectations. "Easy in and easy out" is not only expected, it is demanded by web users.

The interactive nature of the web allows users to identify and absorb the more subtle qualities of brand awareness. What transforms information into a memorable brand experience is the way it is visualized, designed, paced and transmitted. The visual architecture of a well designed website encases site metaphors with a clean layout. Use of space, proportion and pacing combine to create a brisk assimilation of the brand.

A strategically designed robust website saves you money in the long run because you won't have to redesign your site in six months. Most importantly, if designed right,

your website will not look like another website – it will feel like your brand.

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