

## Unleashing the Power of Words

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### Unleashing the Power of Words

Last month we wrote about how words make the web work. We talked about how good writing is rare on the web. In part because the work involved in writing well is often underestimated.

This month we're hitting the subject of words again. Since writing good web copy requires hard work you'll need some extra motivation. We are focusing on how words have particular power on the web. By simply putting your words on the web, your efforts can be multiplied. Understanding this phenomenon can help you persevere in the hard work of writing, knowing that your labor is not in vain.

#### The Normal Power of Words...

There is much to be said for the power of words in any context: written, spoken, printed, or published on the web. Words are powerful because they enable us to communicate. This wondrous capacity is, without question, the most essential tool for the progress of mankind. I make this statement knowing that overstatement is a symptom of terrible writing. But the fact that this is not an overstatement testifies to how amazing words really are! Written words are filled with potential. They are like knowledge batteries, holding their charge until they are slotted into place. Written words unleash their power when they are plugged into the mind of the reader. Word choice and sentence structure determine your effectiveness in conveying meaning to your reader. Word power holds true on the web just as it does in print. Therefore, we should pay careful attention to our words, regardless of their manner of delivery.

But on the web, words have even more power.

### How People Use Search Engines

I love the way the web has unleashed the power of words. Here's an example of how this works: I am going to stop writing for two minutes and explore an idea about which I currently have very little knowledge...say the archaeology of buttons. Be back in a minute...

...Wow! Who knew that so many people have written about the historical influence of buttons? In just a few minutes I learned something completely new, due to the fact that someone wrote about it and put it on the web! Archaeological information has been available in books, magazines, and scholarly papers in university libraries everywhere. However, without the web, that's where it would stay. On the web, I can access these words from my computer while listening to music and working on my newsletter.

The web makes words instantly, immediately, and readily accessible. The vast amount of available and accessible words requires another marvelous invention...the search engine. Search engines make it possible for me to discover all this available information. When an archeology professor publishes a paper about a dig containing some interesting buttons, it's no longer read only by his students. Five years later, I read it on my computer screen after taking just 20 seconds to do a Google search.

Of course, pictures are available online too. In fact, I saw some interesting images of historic buttons as I did my mini-research. But here's why words trump pictures: I only found the pictures because someone wrote WORDS to describe it...either in the image's "ALT" tag or in a caption pertaining to the image. If it wasn't for the words associated with the image, I would never have found it on the web. So at least in this regard, words have more potential power on the web than images.

### Using Graphics as Text

### **Please permit me to rant a bit about certain a pet-peeve...**

Words have such inherent power; yet they have even more power on the web. Beyond their normal capacities for communication, words on the web gain the attribute of accessibility. In addition to the accessibility of the words themselves, their sheer existence creates the possibility of discovery. Because words can be "read" or, to be more technically correct, because they can be downloaded, indexed, and processed by search engines, the very fact that they exist helps me find them. So why then, I ask, do so many websites conceal their valuable words by disguising them as graphics rather than presenting them as "readable," discoverable text?

The obvious answer is that designers want to pick typefaces or typographic effects that cannot be produced on the web without using graphics. I have sympathy for this inclination; I even use graphics as text myself from time to time. But I know that when I do choose to use a graphic instead of text, it has the cost of obscuring the words themselves; it empties them of their extra power. When a search engine looks at an image, it sees a block of pixels that could represent an image of a frog just as easily as it represents my nicely designed typographic page title. But alas, sometimes, as Fernando Lamas would say, "It's better to look good than to feel good." Sometimes we can't resist going for the look, even though it makes our words less functional on the web.

***But for the love of words***, why would anyone put all of their text in a graphic? I've seen this way too many times (especially on agency and design firm websites...hint hint). Using graphics for page titles is costly enough...especially since search engines consider page titles among the most important words on a page. Nevertheless, I can understand the urge to make those page titles look really good. But using a graphic to display body copy? Why completely obscure and hide away all of those valuable, powerful words?

I think it's an act of disrespect to words. They're sitting right there on the screen; they want to tell the world their story...but instead they're locked up, muted, and silenced from declaring their message. Poor words. Let them go! Do it...just kill that inclination to give your paragraph a drop shadow or to control the rag of the line breaks.

[I love typography](#). In a former letter-press life I used to painstakingly replace metal "em" quads with "en" quads so I could hang punctuation into the margins of the page. I hate to admit it, but outside of typographers and fine press printers, nobody ever noticed. Today on the web, people are used to paragraphs that don't quite flow the way we might like them to. Some people even increase their font sizes on purpose so they can read a webpage more easily...a typographer's nightmare! But with due respect to Hal Curtis, whom I greatly admire, the days of art directors tormenting studio artists with endless tweaks to type are over. No more scanning, laser printing, enlarging on the Cannon copier (not the Minolta) then reducing them back down using the stat camera instead of the copier, for that slightly grainy feel; those days are over, at least on the web anyway.

## **Importance of Website Design**

### **Repeated from last month... and from many months before...**

In print, visual impact, beauty, or making sure that type just plain fits is immensely important. In print, a word is a word, whether it's in the body copy or dropped out of a four color image. But the marketing paradigm for using images in print is not the same on the web. In print, visual impact grabs attention. You have to have attention before you can say anything. In this regard, in print, the importance of visuals can trump words. But on the web, the attention-grabbing work of the image is not necessary at all. This is because people don't walk past websites or have websites presented to them in between television shows. Instead, people go to websites by choice. They go to a website on purpose by clicking on a link or by typing in a URL. Site design has no influence whatsoever in whether someone chooses to click on a link. Once they do click, the way the site looks again becomes important... but not supremely important.

### **Words imprisoned by Flash**

At this point in time (hopefully this will change soon), search engines view Flash movies in the same way they view images... they don't. Any words that you display in a Flash movie are not read on the web. The extra power of words that we've highlighted in this newsletter is also obscured in Flash. We're looking forward to changes in Flash and in search engine technology, so that this will no longer be the case. Flash use has one big upside in that it mitigates many of the browser display problems plaguing the web. For now though, we believe that the benefit of simplifying browser display issues does not outweigh the importance of words on the web. Therefore, we try to use both graphic typography and Flash animations as auxiliary elements to a website, not as a primary website environment.

### **I'm done ranting now**

Words need to be free on the web. They do powerful things when they're free; they actually have inherent value as words. They get downloaded, indexed, and displayed in search engines. This helps your message and your information reach your audience. That's a good thing. You want that to happen, and it will, unless of course you don't have anything to say. But if that's the case, why build a website?