

Splash is Dead

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Splash pages are dead, well mostly dead anyway. In 1999 I wrote an article for Web Techniques magazine called "Web Sites That Really Make a Splash" (July 1999). In it I talked about the appropriate and inappropriate uses of splash pages. By a splash page I mean a "cover" page for a site that leads into a home page where links into the rest of the site are found. Splash pages typically use animations, sound clips, and perhaps animated tag lines. If the first page on a site has a "skip intro" link, it's a splash page. In the article, one of the appropriate instances for using a splash page was for a design company (like yours and mine) to show creativity. In fact I would venture to guess that most of you reading this newsletter currently use a splash page on your site. I hope, without ruffling too many feathers, I can persuade you that splash is now dead.

Splash pages are fun to build. Splash pages can be really creative and allow us to play with animation and sound. At Newfangled we spent lots of time and had tons of fun designing our splash page. If you want to check it out you can go to www.newfangled.com/oldsplash/machine.html.

Believe me, it was a hard decision to dump our splash page. If you come to our office, when you enter the receiving area the whole wall in front of you is covered with a large graphic of what used to be our splash page. We really liked it, and we've received many compliments about it, even some complaints that we got rid of it! So why did we drop the splash page?

Turning away visitors.

The number one reason for getting rid of our splash page was that it turned away at least 25% of our site visitors, sometimes more. This percentage is has actually been researched and it turns out that at least 25% of site visitors will immediately leave a site as soon as they see a "loading" message for a Flash splash screen (even if there's a "skip intro" link). Our access logs confirmed this for us and this over all the other reasons caused us to get rid of it. The opportunity to "prove our creativity" was not worth the loss of such a high percentage of visitors.

What kind of impression are we making?

Making this decision was a painful but actually a very healthy process. It is much too easy to rely on glitz over substance when it comes to marketing. This mistake is all too common on the web. We designers have to overcome many of our inclinations when it comes to web design, especially when it comes to our own sites. The web perhaps more than any other medium, requires less "impact" and more substance. This is hard for us as designers, not because we lack substance, but because we are so used to using our creativity to get attention for the substance of a message.

Splash Page Usage

Why the web is different from other marketing methods.

The web is fundamentally different from just about every other marketing medium. It is a passive source of information. People go to it, rather than it going to them. Television commercials, ads in magazines, billboards on the highway, posters in an airport, they all get "pushed" in front of me. When I watch TV, commercials are forced upon me (although not anymore, I have TiVo!). When I read a magazine I must flip past ads. Each of these marketing attempts has a great deal of work to do to get my attention. When I am actively watching a show, or reading an article, ads have to wrestle my attention away from my primary activity. We, as creative professionals, have had to learn how to use creativity and visual impact to wrestle attention away from a person's primary activity and get them to pay attention to our

client's message.

The web is different. Websites don't show up on the side of the road as I drive by. They don't interrupt the Patriots game. The only time I see a website is if I type in the address or click on a link to deliberately go there (annoying pop-up ads excluded). Therefore, when I arrive at website it has to do nothing to grip my attention other than to deliver the information I am expecting to find (of course in a way that is professional, well designed, and easy to access). They do not have to announce themselves or draw my attention from something else. I am going to it; I am pulling the information to me.

This distinction is critical to why splash pages are a bad idea. This distinction is also critical for us to understand why we, as designers, tend to make this mistake and so frequently use splash pages. It goes against the pattern of everything else we are used to doing when it comes to creativity, design, and marketing.

If you buy the fact that a website has a very different kind of "work" to do than a television spot, or billboard then you can see why splash pages are so disliked by most site visitors. It's because we're overpowering a visitor, shouting at them to "wake up" and pay attention to our message when we already have their complete attention.

Imagine if you were going to come and visit me at my home. You would need to take a trip to get there, and hopefully, if the directions were good and the street signs were marked and easy to read, you would find my house. I would probably tell you to look for the tan house with the blue fence and when you pulled up to the house you would see that it matched the description I'd given you. You would also be able to see the number of the house right next to the front door to make sure you have the right address. You would be able to see that the mailbox is labeled "Holter." All this would tell you that you've found the right house and so you would walk up to the door and ring the bell.

How would you feel if, at that moment, a marching band started streaming out of the front door placing the "Welcome to the Holter's March" and a big banner dropped down over the doorway that read, "You've Arrived at the Holter's." Then, what if you had to wait as a few people came out and each one told you a short bit about our house or about our family? Finally, when all the fanfare was over, you were instructed to ring the bell again and we would then come to the door. Unless this was some kind of surprise party, I don't think such a welcome would be very well received. In fact, it might send you running.

The fact of the matter is that we don't have to work very hard at getting attention when it comes to designing the home page of our websites. If they arrive on our site we already have their attention. However, there is a great deal of work that does need to be done on a home page, but it's not attention getting work.

The kind of work that does have to be done is clarifying, organizing, positioning, and message defining. This is very hard work. This work extends well beyond the home page and impacts the entire site. The ironic thing is that we tend to spend a lot of time building splash pages that work hard, when they don't have to work hard, and the work they are doing often hurts rather than help. Then on top of that, the time we spend on a splash page takes away from the time we might otherwise spend crafting our positioning, content, and message for the homepage and the overall structure and organization of the site. We would be far better off, and have more site visitors, if we spent more time on the substance of the site and did away with the splash page altogether.

Splash Pages and Search Engines

Splash page search engine problems.

There is another kind of work that a website needs to do (which is also hindered by the use of a splash page). A website needs to be friendly to search engines so that it will be easier for people to find your site. Getting traffic is an incredibly important part of using your site effectively. Specifically search engine traffic can be a valuable benefit to having a website. But a splash page can actually camouflage your site from search engines. To extend the visit analogy, not only does a splash page bombard a visitor upon their arrival, but they also make it hard to find the house in the first place. Again a splash page fights against the effective use of your site.

Splash pages tend to be built using Flash. Flash is an excellent technology, but it's very limited in terms of its ability to be indexed by search engines. Therefore if your main, default web page is a splash page with a Flash animation, a search engine will see exactly nothing. At best it might see the "skip intro" link, assuming of course that this link is not contained in the Flash animation as well. Some splash pages use a technical technique called meta refreshing. This simple JavaScript code tells the splash page to open a new window after a

few seconds or advance automatically to the home page after a few seconds. Because porn sites use this trick in extremely invasive ways, most search engines not only fail to follow such links, but they might actually drop a site using this technique in fear that it would lead to inappropriate content.

Website Branding

What About Website Branding?

I can hear an objection rising. What about branding? Doesn't a splash page give you an opportunity to make an impact for your brand image? In my 1999 article I argued that for sites like Coca Cola a splash page is appropriate because their branding was all about glitz. I might still hold this view in that particular case but there are very few instances such as this, and even in this case there are probably better things to do for a brand like Coke, than spin its logo.

I don't think splash pages do very much for branding. First of all we need to remember that for as much as 25% of your visitors, it's making zero impact for your brand (or even worse, a negative impact). Of the remaining 75% I would venture to guess that the majority of them click the "skip into" link before the Flash animation has downloaded and run. Finally, I would suggest that what a person sees and experiences after the splash, with regard to the site's clarity, your company's positioning, their ability to use the site's functionality, and their ability to find the information they need, all are going to create a brand impact far greater than if they watch a Flash intro. Take the time spent on conceptualizing and building a splash page and instead spend it on the home page's message and its supporting content and overall brand impact will be far greater than what a splash page would ever accomplish on its own.

Another facet of emphasizing the whole site as branding, over a splash page, is that your positioning and marketing message should be continually refined (not changed, but refined). It's potentially much easier to make ongoing adjustments to a home page and supporting site pages especially if you use the [NewfangledCMS](#) (hey, I have to get some self-promotion into this thing some how) than it is to make substantive adjustments to a Flash animation.

Another very important aspect of the branding question is how using a splash page positions you in your prospect's mind, simply as a result of the fact that you are using a splash page. Since splash pages aren't preferred by most users, and since your client's site would not likely benefit from a splash page, how does the fact that your site uses a splash page impact your position in their mind?

Download

Finally, and certainly less importantly these days, I would remind us that splash pages typically use large Flash animations with embedded sound files that take time to download (especially for those who still use dial up - they're still out there). Putting a large barrier in front of your site, even with a "skip into" option is always to be avoided. Providing a choice like "Flash" or "non-Flash" might make the download voluntary, but it still puts one more click in the way of your primary site.

All things considered there are very few up sides to using a splash page on your website. I would assume, that like me, the reason so many agencies and design firms still use them is that we just like them too much. It's a tough decision, but I believe it is the right one to make for the ultimate effectiveness of our sites.