

# Three-Click Rule

## Why Websites Don't Work

Michael Burke knows the major blunders that website designers make. "People put stuff up spastically, without thinking about what any of it is good for," says the senior Internet consultant for Websites America USA, whose home office is in Rancho Bernardo. "But the biggest blunder is probably that people don't have a target audience in mind." That goes for personal websites and for commercial ones, says Burke, who will present a small-business workshop at the public library this week.

An ideal website is one that's what Burke calls "visitor-centric." It anticipates "what your visitor wants."

Its content, organization, and navigation tools always have that visitor in mind.

It's easy to feel antiquated when speaking to Burke. Ask what he thinks of counters on websites and you'll hear this: "There are a couple of major players in the Web analytics area that pretty much put Web counters into the dinosaur age. One is Urchin Software; the other is WebTrends. And they can tell you more than you'll ever want to know about what's going on with your website. How many hits you've had, from what countries those hits came, how long people have spent on any particular page, where they went after leaving it. Online merchants who are trying to figure out why people are or aren't buying their products can analyze those visits monthly, quarterly, or every six months, depending on how dynamic their website is" — meaning

how often it changes or how frequently people want or need to visit it. "And nowadays there's a way to recognize returning visitors and to give them something different from what they saw the first time, to keep the site fresh and interesting for them."

The easiest features to change are the graphics. Overdo them, however, and you'll risk losing visitors for another reason: they don't want to wait out the slow download. "If you do have graphics, there are ways to compress them, and the download will go a lot faster," says Burke.

"Screen real estate" is a concept Burke will discuss at the library. The current trend is to go with high density: use smaller screen fonts, so you can get more text on a page. That's because scrolling down is passé.

Another basic tenet is the "three-click" rule. "Somebody should be able to get to whatever information they need within three clicks. People aren't going to dig to find what they want. If they see stuff that doesn't make any sense, they're going to move on" — to somebody else's site.

It's risky, too, to put your navigation buttons "in a strange place,"



From www.visitmexico.com

says Burke. That's because by now we all expect to find the layout and organization that has become standard over time. "You know, About Us, Contact Info, FAQs, and so on."

The design should also be consistent from page to page, to keep your visitors oriented throughout their stay.

The minute you host a website, your business goes from local to global, but some features have resisted standardization, says Burke. "Color preferences tend to be cultural," he has observed. "In Mexico, oranges and browns seem to predominate on websites. In the U.S., the colors tend to be more subtle — grays and blues. And why that is, anthropologists might know."

Logging on to some websites seems to bollix up any computer that's a bit antique. (Indeed, that's exactly what happened to this reporter when she tried to enter Burke's site: [websitesamerica.us](http://websitesamerica.us).) Is that the visitor's problem or the website designer's? "A target audience has technical capability or it doesn't," says Burke. "So you have to ask yourself, 'Are we going to do this for people with a reasonable modem speed,' or are we going to say, 'Hey, it's about time you guys upgraded?'"

He sounds cavalier, despite having read somewhere a chilling statistic. "It said that once somebody gets fed up with a website, they never go back."

Burke declines to name any awful

websites he has seen. Besides, he says, they're easy enough to find. He will say that San Diego biotech companies usually have very good ones. And Pfizer has a great one at [www.pfizer.com](http://www.pfizer.com).

The maker of Viagra, Lipitor, and Zoloft? It's not exactly a small business with few bucks to spare on design.

"Yes, but don't forget," says Burke, "on the Web, all companies look the same size."

A peek at Pfizer determines that, for this reporter at least, a pull-down box, "Select a Disease or Condition," is irresistible. So are the questionnaires: "The symptoms of Alzheimer's — What do I look for?" "Self-Quiz — Could you have symptoms of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?" "Risk Assessor — For estimating your ten-year risk of having a heart attack." And, for what it's worth, the site is very blue, while [www.visitmexico.com](http://www.visitmexico.com) is pumpkin. ■

— Jeanne Schinto

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