

DESIGN BY COMMITTEE

Assembling a crack team of webheads, **Sean Greaney** picks their brains and highlights just how much business you could be missing on account of a poorly designed website.



1. Matt Baker, director, Galaxy Design 2. David Trewern, managing director, DTDigital-Ogilvy Interactive 3. Anthony Milner, product director, Elcom 4. Irene Au, director of user experience, Google
5. Bernie Johnson, director and founder, Adrenalin Media 6. Greg Muller, managing director of web design and development, Bullseye 7. Sam Saltis, managing director, bwired 8. Tony Palmer, CEO, C4 Digital



HOW IMPORTANT IS ENGAGING A USER EXPERIENCE (UX) EXPERT WHEN DEVELOPING A WEBSITE?

IRENE AU: UX experts are trained to gather insights about people's needs and goals and translate those insights into a vision and experience that works well for people. Given that your website will be intended for people to use, you want to have those skills on your team. User experience is a multidisciplinary field. Within Google's UX team we have computer scientists, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, writers and graphic designers.

TONY PALMER: It's absolutely critical. I guess it defines the success of the site and repeat usage. It's also a direct reflection of the brand. If you've got a poor customer experience, it reflects pretty poorly on the brand. I also think that any site that makes it difficult for the user or requires the customer to think too much about completing their task, is ultimately going to result in less repeat business. We did a job for Telstra where we actually built a lab store for one of their regional environments and tested the user centric design against the actual user testing; it was critical to the success of that. So prototypes (wire frames), clickable modules... it's all stuff that's pretty critical to a successful site.

SAM SALTIS: Engaging a user experience expert (someone with the title) is unimportant.

MATT BAKER: Simple and clear! The ROI from a site is directly linked to how well a visitor can understand the value of your offer, and from then how easy it is for them to find the more detailed information they will want. Simple design, clear message, logical processes and straightforward navigation are paramount in this quest. The target demographic will also determine how the site is designed. A web designer is suited to creating websites just as a branding professional is expert at corporate imagery, but only by engaging professional marketing personnel and user

experience experts will the true message of your company, products and services be understood by your target clients and prospects.

IS IT BETTER TO OUTSOURCE WEB DESIGN OR BRING IT IN-HOUSE?

MATT BAKER: Online marketing is one key area of your business that is better to be outsourced. Leveraging the professional knowhow and technology from the experienced design firm that has worked on hundreds and thousands of sites and pages will far outweigh any possible savings in having internal staff putting your offer online. Technology is ever-changing in the online space. New and exciting ways to show your business and to transact with your clients and prospects are born every day. By engaging qualified and skilled companies that make knowing this not only their priority but also their passion, will ensure your site is a leading example of those in your industry.

GREG MULLER: The way I'd answer that is: would you outsource the design or architecture of your home?

SAM SALTIS: If you do choose to bring web design in-house, then please employ designers with web sensibility. These days we're seeing lots of really talented designers who can turn their hand to almost anything online or offline, but it's important to recognise that the person who designed your award-winning print material isn't always the right choice for your web design.

IRENE AU: It depends on the interactivity of the product. In my experience, if you're building an interactive product, it's best to have designers in-house and integrated with the team, working alongside product managers and engineers. Having design as an integral part of the team consistently produces better results for the product.



“The way I'd answer that is: would you outsource the design or architecture of your home, or would you bring it in-house?” GREG MULLER, BULLSEYE

DAVID TREWERN: Good web design and development requires a team of specialists working together. These days, we often have 15 people touch one project. But always with a much smaller core team who 'own' the project. For example, the project may involve a strategist, social media consultant, SEO consultant, information architect, business analyst, art director, designer, usability consultant, researcher, writer, Flash developer, systems architect, senior developer, front end developer, marketing consultant and project manager. Phew! I really don't know how smaller teams can compete (in very high-end web development) considering all the variables involved. Jacks-of-all-trades simply can't cut it anymore.

WHAT ARE SOME EXCITING THINGS HAPPENING WITH WEBSITE FUNCTIONALITY?

MATT BAKER: The web experience has come a long way in the past few years. Website application programming allows you to do almost everything you can do with a stand-alone application and, in most cases, more. One indicator is that Microsoft is joining Google, Zoho and others and building its office suite to be an online application, possibly ready for release later this year.

BERNIE JOHNSON: One of the most important developments in recent years is the utilisation of the AJAX framework to create a much richer experience for end users. AJAX has meant the myriad page reloads needed for website content refreshing no longer exist – the user can now interact with the website content and controls much more seamlessly than before. Augmented reality is another new and exciting development in website and mobile functionality.

TONY PALMER: RIA (rich internet applications), if it is not going to be hot topic in a month, is certainly destined to be exciting in the next few

months. As broadband becomes more prolific and ubiquitous then the ability to deliver better and richer experiences online will start to replace some of the old traditional sites. To point to an example of that, AFL.com.au uses all the statistics that are available to a football coach, and has that available through an interface, or you can slice and dice that content in real time on the page without having to reload it. I think that's really exciting.

WHAT ARE SOME FEATURES THAT HAVE BEGUN TO DATE IN TERMS OF WEB DESIGN?

SAM SALTIS: From a technical point of view some of the features I think are becoming dated include: frames, table layouts (it's not the '90s anymore, we have CSS), too many animated features (overuse of Flash), use of fancy fonts (they're unreadable!), playing music (if the users want audio, let them play it, don't play it automatically), splash pages, 'intros', ignoring cross-browser compatibility, pop-ups and the 2.0 (glossy) look (personally I think this is going out and being replaced by a higher quality finish).

IRENE AU: Any adornment the sole purpose of which is to decorate has the potential to be tomorrow's blinking 'under construction' sign. Pastel palettes and lower case logos with no vowels have had their day.

BERNIE JOHNSON: Fading fast is the practice of left aligning websites. The same goes for spanning the layout to the full width of the window. More and more websites these days have a fixed width and are centre aligned. The reason for this is that resolutions are becoming larger, which allows fixed width centred sites to remain in the middle of the screen, in line with the user's natural line of sight.

TONY PALMER: Page reloads I think are pretty much a thing of the past. If people haven't worked out how to get around that then they probably need to be dealing with some new techies. I think the age of the banner ad is probably numbered.

ANTHONY MILNER: Traditional dropdown menus have begun to date. Mega menus are the new black and they're endorsed by usability experts (they never endorsed regular dropdowns because of the usability issue). Mega menus as the name suggests are large and can cover 50 percent of screen real estate and can contain an entire site map, log-in and search elements. Additionally small text, label and buttons have dated. In addition to user generated content Web 2.0 was also all about usability; larger text and buttons are easier to read and interact with.

HOW DO YOU OPTIMISE WEB DESIGN FOR SEO?

GREG MULLER: You don't need to optimise your entire site. Understand the words that people are going to be searching on and the phrases that people are going to be searching on, and optimise the pages for those particular phrases. Don't try and do it across the entire site. And it's just as much what you do off your website, as what you do on your website as well. Things like having links from an external website that is highly ranked or highly trusted, who is linking to your website and, in particular, to a page that you want to optimise, will also rank very highly.

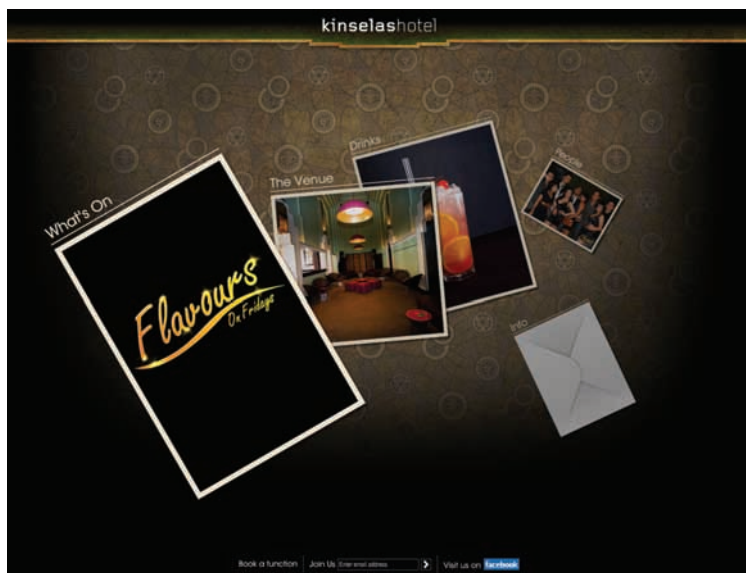
IRENE AU: I have spent much of my career focusing on creating great products on the web; I believe that if you build a great product, people will use it and tell others about it, and the traffic will come. I don't recommend focusing on SEO as a way of designing a website – website design should be focused on users and their needs, not search engines and how they crawl and index the web.

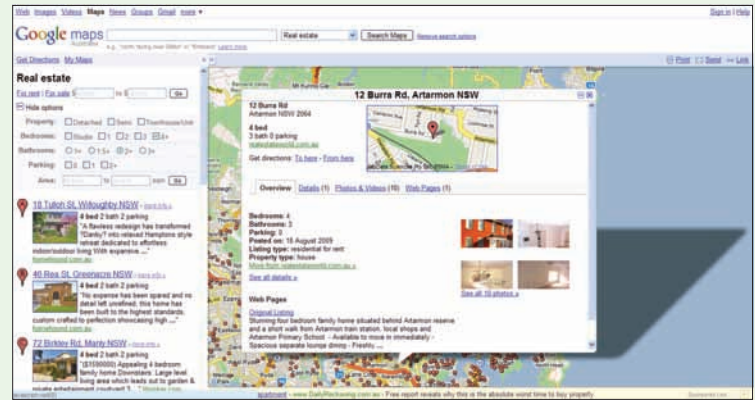
ANTHONY MILNER: Designers need to approach their design as if they were building for a vision impaired or blind user. Why build for blind people I hear you asking? They only make up less than one percent of internet users? Well, besides the fact that it's the right thing to do, it's because a very important internet user is blind. Its name is Googlebot, the great oracle of all man-made knowledge. The Google crawler indexes the entire internet and it does it, oh say, about once a week. It's a computer program that does not visually sight the page, it simply reads it.

HOW CAN MARKETERS LOWER COSTS OF A NEW WEBSITE OR WEBSITE UPDATES?

SAM SALTIS: Engaging an online strategy consultant will offset the cost of a new website by ensuring it is set up to maximise return on investment for the organisation. I spoke with a prospective client just the other day who told me he paid \$50 every time he needed website content updated (how extortionate!).

GREG MULLER: It depends on what you're trying to do and how important your website is to your business. If you can demonstrate strong return on investment and it's a key channel to market, then you've got to spend the money that it deserves. Otherwise you're potentially going to compromise, and there are competitors coming from all different





WEBSITE APPLICATION STUDY

Real estate search and Google Maps Australia

Patrick Hofmann, user experience designer, Google Australia

BACKGROUND

As a Canadian who migrated to Australia four years ago and purchased my new home four weeks ago, I quickly learned Australians aren't merely interested in real estate – they're obsessed by it. It seems to be a national pastime, with open homes on the weekend nearly equivalent to a latte on the way to work.

We knew from our own research that Google Maps was being used more and more often for real estate searches – checking out a suburb on 'Street View', or getting driving directions from a new property to your workplace.

So when a group of us came up with the idea to put current real estate listings on Google Maps in Australia, we thought we were on to something potentially very useful. People would be able to see real estate listings on the map and then 'layer' over those listings all the schools, churches or cafes, in that area. It's a case of technology mimicking the way people actually search – by 'overlaying' different criteria to make their decision – but doing it a whole lot faster.

OBJECTIVE

At Google we often imagine designing products and features from scratch, using not just today's technology but building in what the web will be capable of in the future. Although online real estate search showing listings on a map has been around for a few years now, we thought there might be a fresh way to tackle the challenge of putting the map at the heart of the experience. Isn't real estate all about location, location, location?

With traditional online real estate sites you enter all your criteria, click submit and then see the results that match your search shown on a map. But if you move the map to see what's available in an adjacent suburb you don't see any new results – and we figured that was pretty frustrating.

With the new feature, the map itself becomes one of your search criteria. So, as you see all of the million-dollar homes that you searched for in your neighbourhood, you can pan and zoom to other areas 'outside your search' and see the map update automatically with new results.



“As a designer, Google really keeps you on your toes, because everything is a moving target or a work in progress.”
PATRICK HOFMANN, GOOGLE

We also tried to avoid the user feeling like they were filling out a form and submitting it – we wanted the experience to provide an instant and iterative cause and effect, because people love instant gratification. When you make a change to your search criteria – like changing from two bedrooms to three bedrooms – you'll see the new results instantly when you click 'three bedrooms'. This leads to some nice 'wow' moments: "Wow, I didn't realise how many two bedroom apartments there were available in Manly for under \$600,000". It also helps people to play with their assumptions about what they're looking for – by tweaking their criteria to pay, say, \$20 more a week in rent, they'll get an immediate response on their web page.

PROCESS

As a designer, Google really keeps you on your toes, because everything is a moving target or a work in progress. In traditional software development, you design upfront, and then develop your product or feature. Because Google Maps is such an organic, dynamic product, constantly being updated, the development of this new feature had to be done in parallel. This really worked to our advantage at times. For example, the new Google Maps technology that sprinkles all the results on the map (not just the top 10) launched only a few months before the real estate search feature did – but we were able to include it in order to show every listing that matched a searcher's criteria, rather than just the top 10.

One aspect of the design that we agonised over was the difference between how people search for bedrooms and bathrooms. The bedroom selection is a check box, so people could choose multiple options (they could select two and three bedroom properties if they wanted). But after many heated internal debates and user research, we discovered that bath-

rooms were significantly different: while people have a pretty set idea of how many bedrooms they want, bathrooms tend to be an 'at least' feature i.e. 'we couldn't possibly do with less than two, but above that doesn't really matter'. So we made bathrooms a radio button that people could only select one of: 1+, 2+, and so on.

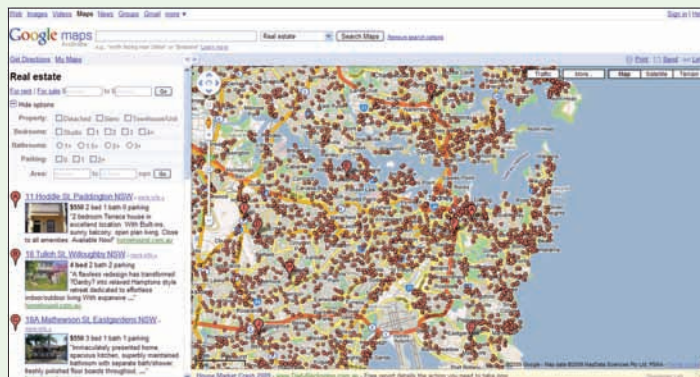
Originally, we played with the idea of introducing icons to represent features in homes (with beds, baths, and carparks being visualised with icons just like on any estate agent's sign). However, in an effort to keep the results easy to scan and easy to load (after all, every nanosecond counts), we discovered it was more efficient to keep it textual. Users are very attuned at scanning and absorbing the text and photos in the search results, and interjecting these tiny new symbols on screen was actually slowing them down.

RESPONSE

We've taken a good look at the data on how people are interacting with the new feature, and it seems that people have quickly learned to interact with the map and with the listings in a new way. On top of this, they're using it to its full potential: seeing where there are clusters of homes for sale or rent by zooming the map out, for example, and further exploring the map to see nearby local features.

Moreover, real estate agents are seeing solid traffic to their listings, putting Australians in touch with the online information they're looking for.

In the future? We'll be working on making it even easier to access real estate listings from the moment you visit Google Maps, and making ongoing tweaks to the user interface to make sure that the total end-to-end experience that people have with real estate listings on Google Maps is a fast and useful one.



angles, both locally and internationally, and therefore you've got to keep that investment up. Putting that aside somewhat, you've got to get the strategy right.

IRENE AU: There are lots of free tools to help you build, monitor and update websites. Make the most of powerful free tools like Google Analytics and Website Optimiser.

BERNIE JOHNSON: Ask yourself, 'Who do I want to be visiting my website?' Like any marketing efforts, it's imperative that you go through the process of segmenting (what groups or industries do I want to reach out to?), targeting (who exactly within these groups will visit my website?) and positioning (what is the branding and messaging I want conveyed on my website to these people?). Online is no different to traditional marketing in the need to first identify and assess your target audience. Pick five of your favourite business websites and list the things you like about them. These don't need to be sites from your industry, but it's a great way of articulating to your agency exactly what features, functionality and look and feel you're after.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD A WEBSITE BE REFRESHED IN TERMS OF DESIGN?

BERNIE JOHNSON: There is no hard rule; however, with the rapid pace of technological change online, after 18 months your website will most likely start to look tired and outdated. The great thing about standards-compliant websites is that if your website is originally designed and built correctly, you can re-skin the site without the need to undergo a ground-up rebuild.

GREG MULLER: In terms of general rules of thumb, we tend to like to be refreshing every two to three years with our partner clients.

DAVID TRAWERN: The best websites evolve iteratively, so that they always look fresh, but users rarely notice the change. For example, Apple is widely touted as being the leader in website strategy and execution, and marketing its products online. In the past five years, however, I doubt many Apple customers have ever noticed a change. Making radical changes for change's sake is a bad idea. It confuses customers and requires them to relearn how your website works.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD A WEBSITE BE UPDATED WITH CONTENT?

SAM SALTIS: If you ask some of the people on Twitter the answer might be every 33 seconds or something equally ridiculous. Most companies other than the most loved (like Apple or Nike) don't have that kind of demand; however, websites should be updated with new content continually in order to boost search engine rankings. If you have news, tell it; if you have changes, make them; and if something exciting is happening, let everyone know. For those of you who haven't made any changes in the last month, you are not updating often enough!

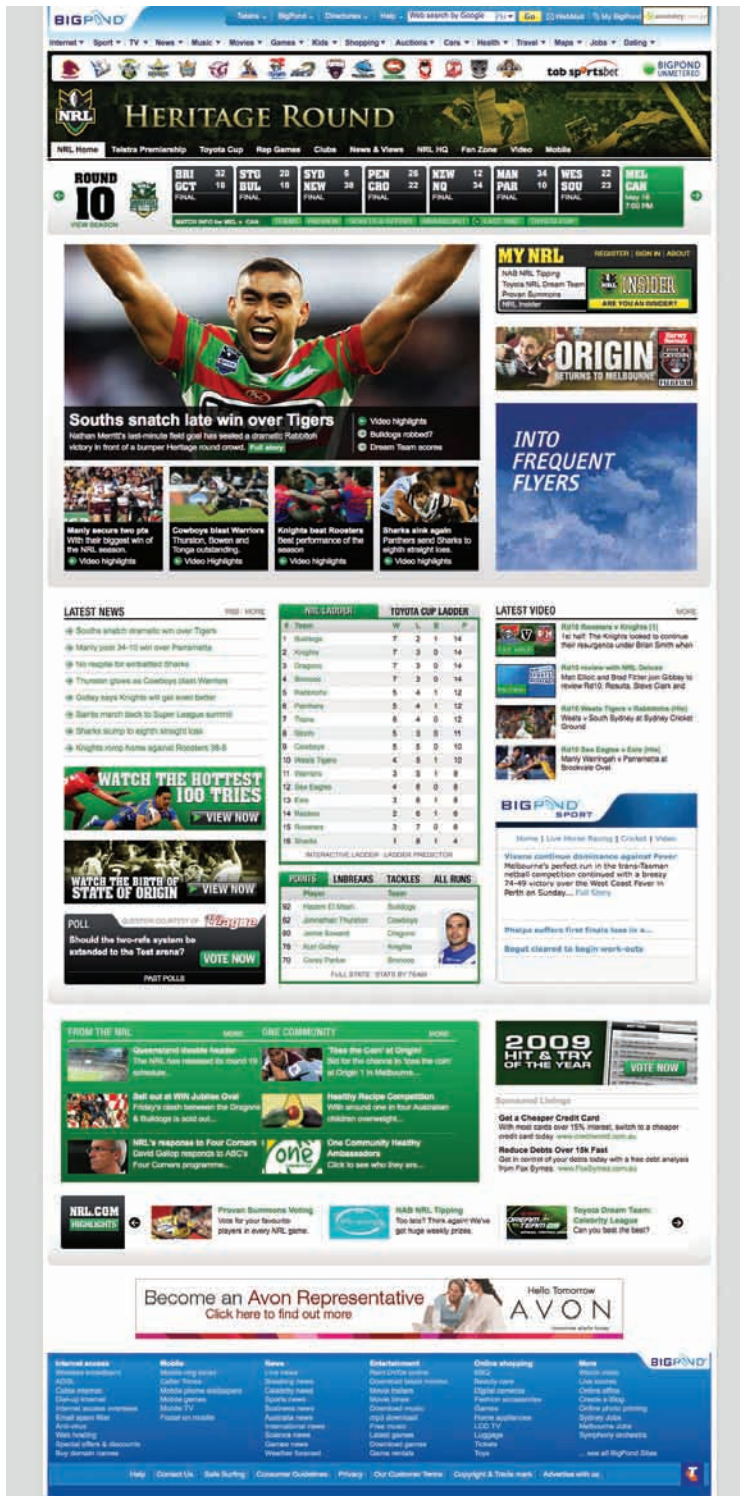
ANTHONY MILNER: Content on a website should be updated frequently, on a daily basis if possible. The overall design of a website should be refreshed at least every 12 months to ensure that the design is keeping up with the latest trends and usability requirements; however, responding to user feedback is essential leading to ongoing incremental improvements.

IF YOU COULD PICTURE WHAT A WEBSITE WOULD LOOK LIKE IN FIVE YEARS, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?

GREG MULLER: I like this question because it's something that is a little bit hard to predict, but the first thing I said to myself was will

they even exist? And of course they'll exist in some form; society just won't change that rapidly. But strategy is going to be very, very important. We're very much moving away from getting a website and just expecting someone will come. All of it though is moving to much greater intelligence and much greater targeting of the customer. So where you traditionally relied on someone actually going to a website, there will be much greater targeting of individuals.

“If you have news, tell it; if you have changes, make them; and if something exciting is happening, let everyone know. For those of you who haven't made any changes in the last month, you are not updating often enough!”
SAM SALTIS, BWIRED



ANTHONY MILNER: Websites and website content won't evolve as rapidly as the devices on which we view them. Get ready for HUDs (head-up displays) on our phones while driving or walking as well as wall and table displays. In other words, the ability to view rich content anywhere anytime. Websites will automatically adapt to these displays by presenting device and bandwidth orientation and content. Text, audio and video will increasingly mesh (think YouTube captions) and Generation Z will probably grow up accustomed to reading text, listening to audio, watching video and interacting with all three seamlessly. Of course the user's inputs will be three-dimensional; i.e. hand gestures, reading, typing and talking.

DAVID TREWERN: More content from more sources will automatically come together in more personalised ways, to deliver more targeted and valuable experiences. Information will be fed to users based upon previous behaviour, stated preferences and immediate requirements. There will be less active searching and more active content. Mash-ups that aggregate related content from different sites are a window to the future. A 'semantic web' – a network that adds meaning and connection to interrelated data – will take hold. The web will be much more social, allowing you to share experience with other people using the same website, or friends. Recommendations from peers, friends and 'people like you' will be a key way in which we access information. **M**

