



## Home Pages Require More Content - Not Less (July, 1999)

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### **Q. What makes for a good interface for a Web site?**

**Mandel:** There's not a lot of attention span on the Web, and people are searching for things. When you're designing a software interface, you usually make sure not to cram too much on the screen, so white space is good, and you don't want too much jargon. But on the Web, if you're browsing for an item, you want more on screen rather than less. That way, you can scan through more information to make a choice. When you have more info in each link, it's easier to make an informed decision; if the link text is too general, it's hard to make a decision.

A lot of companies with Web sites assume that people want to understand how their company works--but they don't. They just want to find what they're looking for. Computer companies ask if you're buying a computer for home or business. Well, what if I'm doing both on my home computer? Users will wonder what's the difference in the two kinds of computers. The company should instead ask what you're doing on the computer: games, networking, packaged software? Where you're using it might not be the deciding factor.

Don't figure out what you're trying to sell. Instead, center it around the user: What are they trying to buy? Also, the whole goal of a Web site should match with what users are trying to do. It can be perfectly designed, but if it's information only and users want to buy, they won't be happy. A site has to be usable and match tasks people are trying to do.

**Q: Can you name some sites whose interfaces you think are done well?**

**Mandel:** Yahoo's is great. It uses progressive disclosure. Look at how it divides up information: "Arts" is in a bigger font, but then it offers a little more information--"literature" and "photography" beneath that in smaller fonts. It's a good way for anyone who has lots of categories of information on their site. I'm working on a site right now where all the top-level section pages have links like that, plus a paragraph of text explaining what's there. That's a good strategy for an important section.

**Q: What are some of the common flaws in sites with bad interfaces?**

**Mandel:** Many of them use the Las Vegas approach: You've got a machine capable of using 16 million colors, so you might as well throw lots of colors and blinky things at people. But from the user's perspective, that stuff is just a distraction. The first time you're in Vegas, there's so much going on, and everything catches your eye for awhile. But, eventually, you become acclimated, and it all fades into the background and then it takes an explosion to catch your attention. If you have a very busy and loud site and want to tell people about a new item, you can't use anything subtle just to say, "Here's something new." On the other end of the spectrum, the whole Quaker Oats site ([www.quakeroats.com](http://www.quakeroats.com)) is text. There's one graphic of the Quaker guy on the front page. That's not to say that you can't have a good site with only text, but this isn't structured at all.

**Q: How do you fix up the Quaker Oats site?**

**Mandel:** That site is more of an index. It's not even a real home page. They should have a home page that, in one screen, says who they are and what they do. Nothing here says who they are. Nothing says hello. There's no feel for what they do. It's dry and empty. A home page should have a little color and some kind of navigational structure. A lot of links here shouldn't be on this page. They put all end links on here, when they should be chunked into categories--"our history," "financial info," "our products." There's nothing about their products on here. It's not oriented toward cereal eaters.

**Interviewer's Note:**

**Since the publication of this interview, the Quaker Oats site has been complete redesigned. The comments here are on the "before" version of the company's site.**

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