

## Website Design Influences Users' Credibility Judgments

It is commonly argued that substance is more important than presentation; and that website content is likely to be judged on the basis of what it expresses, not how ideas are visually dressed up. Although substance is important, it is surprising how much additional influence superficial trappings contribute to users' perceptions of web content. In fact, research suggests that it's not enough to just hire talented website developers, editors and analytics experts; but talented designers can influence how much faith users may place in a given website.

Marketing researchers have conducted extensive investigations to understand how a product endorser's credibility influences potential customers. Traditional marketing literature suggests an association between visual attractiveness and source credibility. With few exceptions, numerous authors report that attractive communicators are more liked; and this positively impacts the products they are associated with. According to the source attractiveness model, a message's impact depends on the endorser's likeability, similarity and attractiveness. When looking at the impact of credibility on purchasing behaviour, researchers have shown that the willingness to buy a product is statistically associated with perceptions of an endorser's trustworthiness, expertise, and visual attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990).

Given a strong empirical relationship between an endorser's attractiveness and their source credibility, it appears that the same trend also holds for websites. In a sense, websites can operate like social actors who make endorsements. Across various investigations, researchers are discovering that website attractiveness is related credibility in a number of interesting ways. First, researchers concluded that website design may have a greater impact on consumers' attitudes towards websites than their offline perceptions of the organizations. Furthermore, they found a significant association between website design and users attitudes towards websites; in this study, three out of their six dimensions were trust and credibility based (Long and Chiagouris, 2006).

Second, website visuals can trigger a user to form a strong and lasting first impression; and the strength of their emotional reactions to that website can influence their memories of given products. It has been argued that emotionally evocative web designs can increase a website's influence while strengthening users' memories of products. These factors are cited as reason why developers strive to develop emotionally evocative websites (Kim et al., 2003). But more importantly, visually attractive websites have been shown to produce a 'halo effect' that forms a positive impression in users' minds which can persist despite successive negative experiences. This first impression can be formed in as little as 50 milliseconds (Lindgaard et al., 2006). These investigations suggest that visually attractive websites deliver an emotional payload that can create a strong first impression which can influence users' memories and cause them to overlook obvious risks.

Third, one experiment which examined the role of images in content credibility showed an article on health to three groups. The first group who read the article, had a photo of a high-credibility ranked doctor; the second group, a low-credibility ranked doctor; the third, a control group with just the article, but no photo. Even though the article remained the same, subject believed the article with the more credible looking doctor photo was most credible, the text without a photo was second, and the text with a low-credibility image was ranked the least credible (Nguyen and Masthoff, 2007). Amazingly, this research showed how the correct photo could enhance or decrease perceptions of article credibility.

Website design seems to operate like rhetoric, which takes the substance of an argument, spins it, restructures it, and presents it in a more persuasive manner. Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle argued that persuasive rhetoric could make a weak argument stronger; and it could make a strong argument even stronger. Perhaps, website design operates in the same way, by making content appear more believable than it deserves, and the website operators to be more trustworthy than is warranted.

Given that website design can evoke users' emotions and impact their credibility judgements, the practical ramification for website operators is simple: web design can impact the success of your online enterprise. It can boost users' likelihood of believing content; it can influence their probability of trusting the organization operating a website; it can create a strong and lasting first impression. Likewise, poor design can evoke mistrust, disbelief, and disregard. When competing in saturated online environments--by either promoting products, ideas or behaviours--credulity is a factor that can increase or decrease a users' willingness to believe, act or buy from you, as opposed to your competition.

Obviously, the best way to appear credible is to be credible, by being honest and reliable, and building a reputation over time. However, for honest, but new online ventures, in some cases, potential clients may have no way to figure out if your organization is credible or bogus. And to show these persons you are a credible organization, you'll have to draw upon all possible means to show that your enterprise is legitimate and reliable. Although there are many things that can be done to foster trust, a professionally designed website, appropriate to your target audiences, is a good start.

The implications for Internet users are also simple: be cautious. Since people's judgements of credibility is easily manipulated by design and editorial skills, it's not surprising that the Internet has become an incubator for conspiracy theories, pseudo science, and urban legends that are serving as substitutes for fact-checked and empirically grounded knowledge (Thompson, 2008). And considering that 90% of people cannot identify well designed

online scam, even when they're looking for it (Dhamija et al., 2006), it is no surprise that online crime has become a booming business. Given these trends, it's best to only extend belief in content from reputable sources; and find ways to verify the legitimacy of sites before believing, buying or acting on their services or information. The traditional signals of criminal intent are very difficult to detect online, and with design-based-credibility easily copy'n pasted, it's important to exercise caution because looks can be deceiving.

### About the Author

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