

A Brain-Friendly Guide

# Head First Web Design

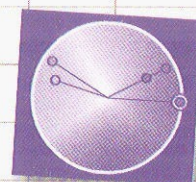
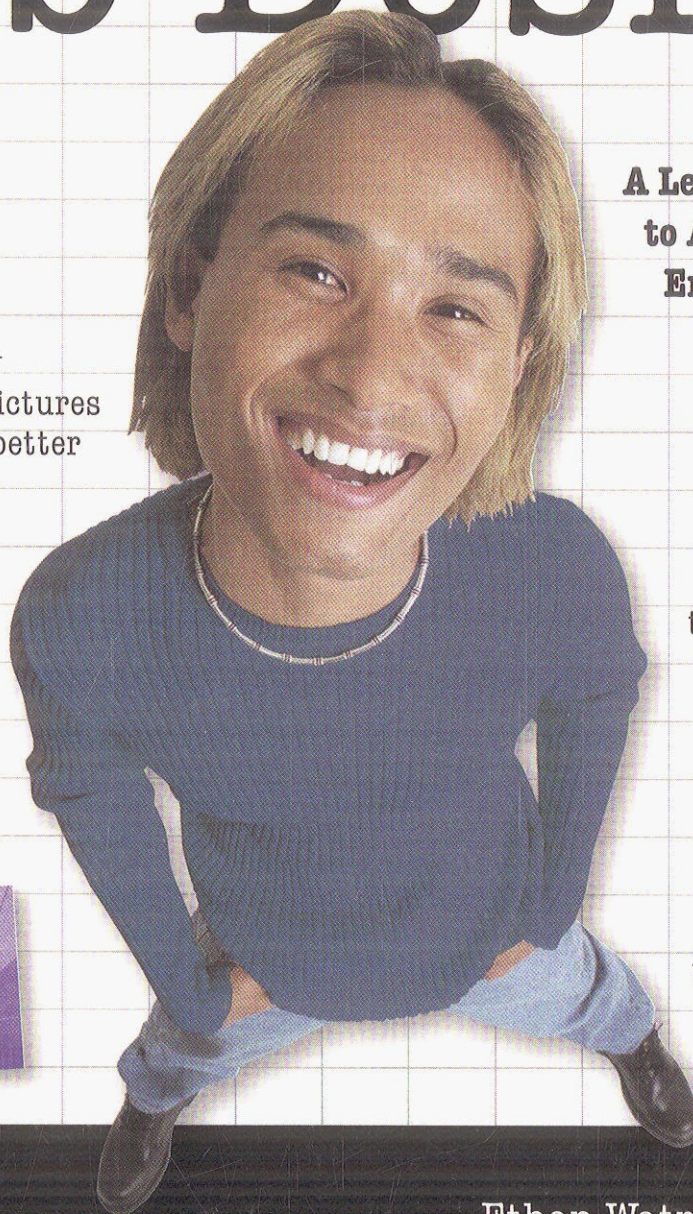
**A Learner's Companion  
to Accessible, Usable,  
Engaging Websites**



Learn how  
drawing pictures  
produces better  
websites.



Give your users  
what they really want  
from your website.



Master the  
triadic and tetradic  
color schemes.



Use accessibility to  
get your message  
out to millions.



Prevent the  
pernicious Foo  
Bar from ripping  
off your designs.

**O'REILLY®**

Ethan Watrall & Jeff Siarto

# Table of Contents (Summary)

	Intro	xxi
1	Beauty is in the Eye of Your User: <i>Building Beautiful Web Pages</i>	1
2	Paper Covers Rock: <i>Pre-Production</i>	37
3	“So you take a left at the green water tower...”: <i>Organizing Your Site</i>	69
4	Follow the Golden Rule: <i>Layout and Design</i>	109
5	Moving Beyond Monochrome: <i>Designing With Color</i>	159
6	“In 2 seconds, click ‘Home’.”: <i>Smart Navigation</i>	193
7	Yes, You Scan!: <i>Writing For The Web</i>	227
8	Inaccessibility Kills: <i>Accessibility</i>	275
9	The Pathway to Harmonious Design: <i>Listen to Your Users</i>	319
10	Keeping Your Site Fresh: <i>Evolutionary Design</i>	369
11	Mind Your Own Business: <i>The Business of Web Design</i>	403
i	Leftovers: The <i>Top Ten Things (We Didn’t Cover)</i>	439

# Table of Contents (the real thing)

## Intro

**Your brain on Web Design.** Here *you* are trying to *learn* something, while here your *brain* is doing you a favor by making sure the learning doesn’t *stick*. Your brain’s thinking, “Better leave room for more important things, like which wild animals to avoid and whether naked snowboarding is a bad idea.” So how *do* you trick your brain into thinking that your life depends on knowing web design?

Who is this book for?	xxii
We know what you’re thinking	xxiii
Metacognition	xxv
Bend your brain into submission	xxvii
Read me	xxviii
The technical review team	xxx
Acknowledgments	xxxix



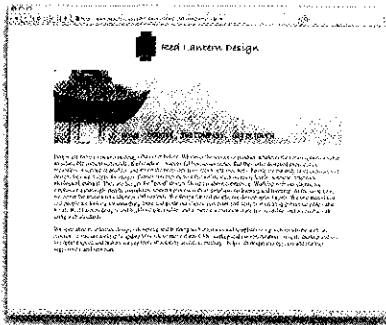
# building beautiful web pages

## Beauty is in the eye of your user

# 1

### It's a great big (wide) world... but who's really out there?

So you've got your nice shiny XHTML and CSS diploma hanging on the wall, and the prospective clients are ringing your new business line off the hook. Cool, right? Yeah... until you get your first complaint about a bad layout, or a logo that's just so 1998. So how do you create **really beautiful websites** and still make sure they satisfy your users? It all begins with good planning. Then you've got to **write for the Web**, **know your audience**, and, above all else, make sure you're **designing for your users**, not yourself.



Your big chance with Red Lantern Design

2

Where do you start?

5

Draw up a blueprint first

7

Determine your Top Level Navigation

13

Put it all in context

15

Show Jane some basic design sketches

16

Sketches keep the focus on functionality

17

Don't ruin a good design with bad copy

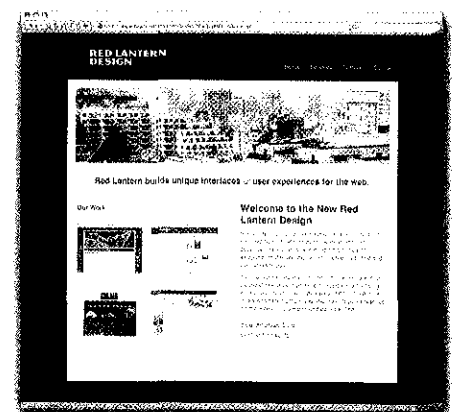
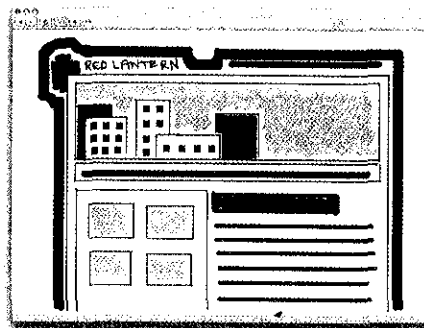
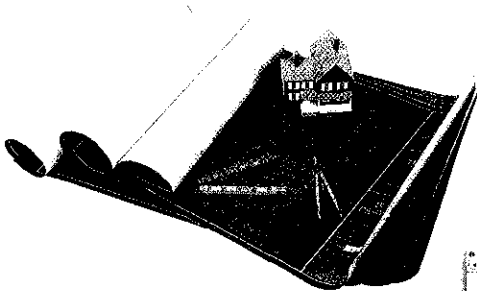
28

What makes text scannable?

29

Web design is all about communication, and your users

35



pre-production

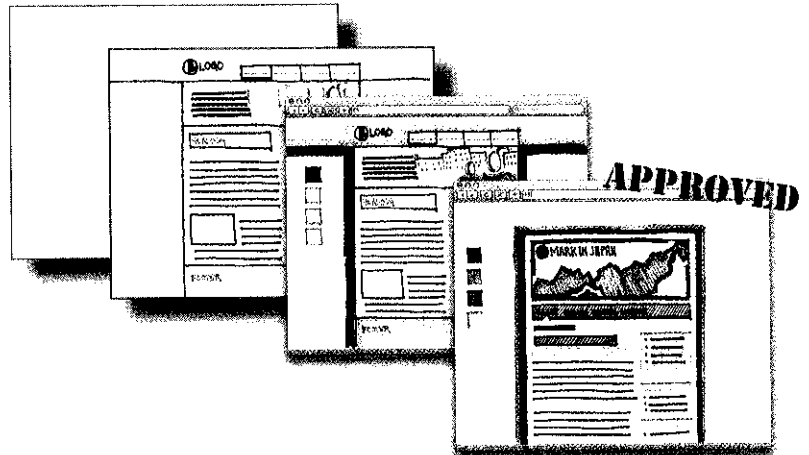
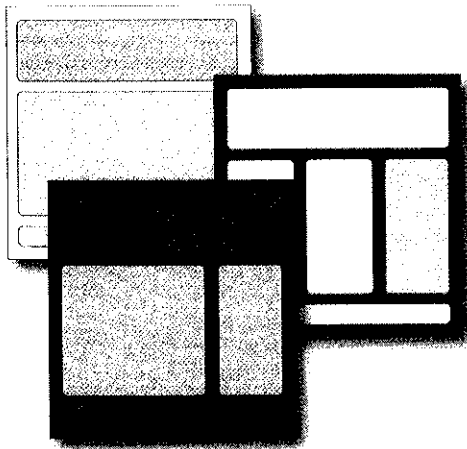
## Paper covers rock

2

**Tired of butting heads with a picky client?** Yeah, you know the type... every time you show them their latest crazy design idea, they've already moved on to another look... another color scheme... another entire website. So how do you deal with **fickle clients** or those tricky **hard-to-get-right websites**? You start with paper, pencil, and a big fat pink eraser. In this chapter, you'll learn how to work smart before you dig into your HTML editor. Coming up with a **theme** and **visual metaphor** for your site, mocking up sketches in **pencil**, and using **storyboards** will turn you into a nimble, flexible web designer. So get out your sketch pad, and let's pre-produce!



Your first "international" gig...	38
Think before you code	40
A clear visual metaphor helps reinforce your site's theme	41
A theme represents your site's content	42
Brainstorming: The path to a visual metaphor	45
Develop a theme and visual metaphor for Mark	46
Your page elements shape your visual metaphor	49
Build a quick XHTML mock-up for Mark	56
And the CSS...	57
Use storyboards to develop ideas and save time without code	61
Don't design for yourself!	62
Let's create a storyboard for Mark	64



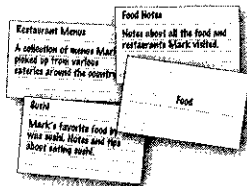
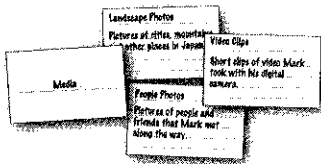
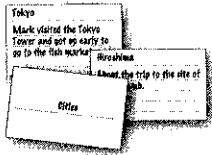
## organizing your site

### “So you take a left at the green water tower...”

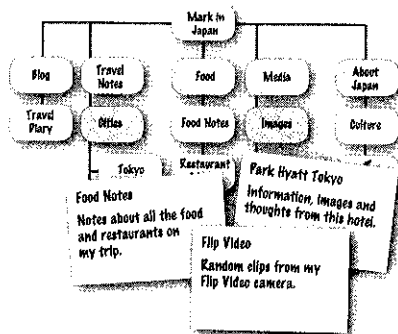
# 3

#### A little shaky on your site navigation?

When it comes to the Web, **users are impatient**. They don't want to waste lots of time looking for the right button or wading through three levels of your JavaScript pull-down menus. That's why you've got to spend a lot of time getting your site's organization right... before you get into construction and design. Last chapter, you came up with a great theme and look for your site. In this chapter, you'll really amp things up with a **clear organization**. By the time you're done, you'll have a site that **tells your users where to go** and keeps them from ever getting lost again.



Fit your content into your layout	71
Organize your site's information	72
Keep your site organized with Information Architecture (IA)	79
IA—The card sorting way	80
Card Sorts Exposed	81
Sort your cards into related stacks	86
Give your stacks names that are short and descriptive	87
Which card sort is right?	92
Arrange your cards into a site hierarchy	93
IA Diagrams are just card sorts on paper	95
IA Diagrams are NOT just links between pages	96
Move from pre-production to production	100
Build Mark's site structure	101
Create index.html first...	102
...and then screen.css for style	103
Pre-production to production: The complete process	106



## layout and design

### Follow the Golden Rule

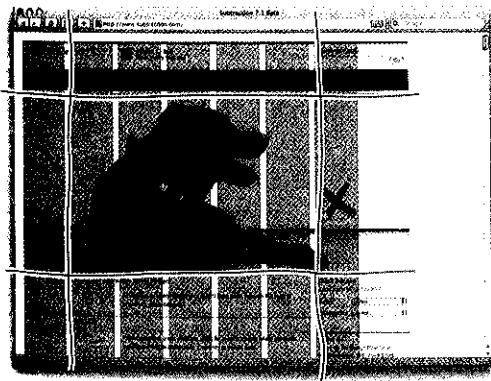
# 4

It pays to be a good listener... and to carry a pocket calculator.

We've been talking about **user-centered design** for a few chapters, but here's where you really put your listening skills to the test. In this chapter, you'll take your users' feedback and build a site that meets their needs. From **browsers** to **screen real estate**, it's all about giving your users what they really want. Not only that, you'll learn the secrets of the **rule of thirds**. Find out how a few easy presses of the *calculator*, a *ruler*, and some *gridlines* can turn your blase web page into a thing of **beauty**.



Name: Ann  
Age: 28  
Internet Connectivity: DSL  
Avg. time online/week for leisure: 18 hours  
Browser of choice: Firefox  
Operating System: Windows XP  
Screen Resolution: 800x600  
Occupation: Student  
Details: Ann considers herself very tech savvy. She actively participates in social networks and online communities. She also regularly shops online. Her laptop (which is a little old, but all she can really afford right now) is her primary computer—and where she does all of her web browsing.



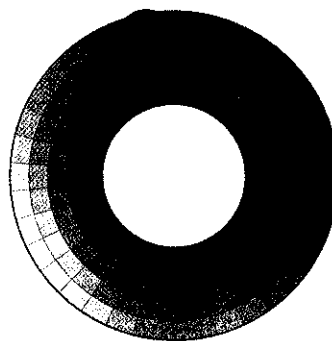
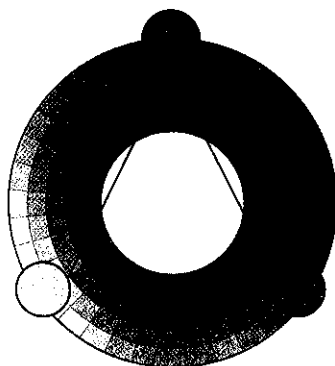
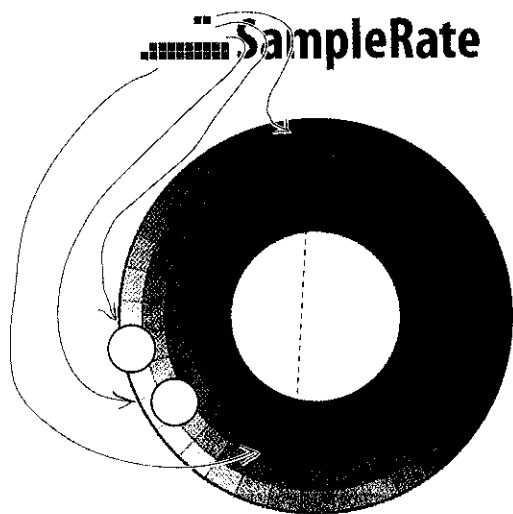
Design is about audience	110
Your newest gig: RPM Records	113
Pinpoint RPM's audience with personas	114
Let the personas be your guide...	120
Resolution impacts design and layout	122
Screen real estate determines how much of your site will display in your user's browser	124
Build an XHTML and CSS foundation optimized for 1024x768	128
Humans like things lined up and well-organized	132
How wide should my grid be? Use the Golden Ratio	133
The rule of thirds: A shortcut to the Golden Ratio	134
RPM and the Golden Ratio: An (anti) case study	135
Remember your personas and client?	139
Set up RPM 2.0 with the Blueprint Framework	141
Use Blueprint CSS rules to style RPM 2.0	144
Time to get your RPM groove on	145
Add some CSS to clean up the layout	149
Finish off the content and navigation markup	151
Add layout and typographic details with some more CSS	154

# 5

## Moving Beyond Monochrome

**Color is the unsung hero of web design.** A good color palette can draw your audience into your site, give them a powerful feeling of immersion, and keep them coming back for more. And when it comes to color and web design, it's not just about picking a **good color palette**, it's also about how you **apply** those colors. You can have a great color palette, but if you don't use those colors **thoughtfully**, people might avoid your site like the plague. By the end of this chapter, you'll not only be intimately familiar with the impact that color has on the web user, but you'll also be able to choose a great looking color palette that fits in—and even complements—your user-centered websites.

Help support your local music scene	160
9Rules: The blog network gold standard	161
Sometimes your choices are a bit... limited	162
Color has an emotional impact	163
The color wheel (where it all begins)	167
Use the color wheel to choose colors that "go together"	170
First, choose your base color	170
Use the triadic scheme to create usable color patterns	171
Get started on the SampleRate markup	173
Create the basic page layout with CSS	174
The opposite of heavy is... light	180
Create a richer color palette with the tetradic color scheme	182
Let's update the SampleRate CSS	186



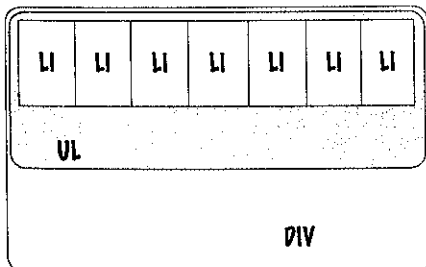
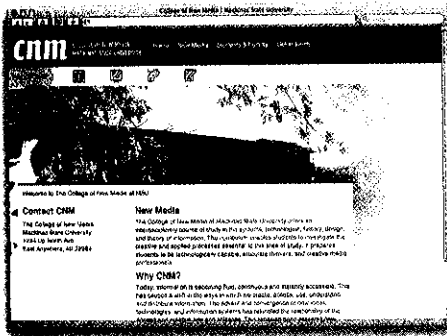
## smart navigation

### “In 2 seconds, click ‘Home’.”

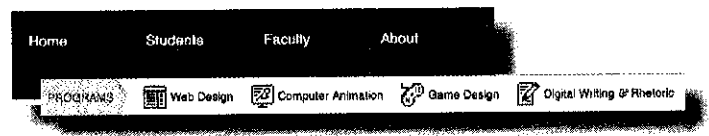
# 6

## What would the web be without navigation?

Navigation is what makes the web such a powerful information medium. But here's the thing: navigation is a lot more than just whipping up some cool-looking buttons and slapping them into your design. Building smart navigation starts with your information architecture and continues through your entire design process. But how does it work? How do you really make sure your users never get lost? In this chapter, we'll look at different styles of navigation, how IA guides your page links, and why icons (alone) aren't always iconic.



School's back in session	194
The first step in good navigation is good IA	197
What's really in a name, anyway?	198
Approach #1: Horizontally-tabbed navigation	204
Approach #2: Vertical navigation	206
Block elements are your friends	212
Let's float the block navigation on the CNM site	213
Icons don't SAY anything... they just look pretty	215
Add icons to your text, not the other way around	217
Update the CNM XHTML to use textual links	218
Now we can style our new block elements...	219
Primary navigation shouldn't change... but secondary navigation should	221
Each sub-page gets its own secondary navigation	222
Let's style the navigation with our CSS	223





# writing for the web

## Yes, you scan!

# 7

**Writing for the web is just like any other kind of writing, right?** Actually, writing for the web is completely different than writing for print.

People don't read text on the web like they read text on a printed page. Instead of reading text from left to right, beginning to end, they **scan** it. All of the text on your site needs to be quickly **scannable** and **easily digestible** by the user. If not, users won't waste their time on your site, and they'll go somewhere else. In this chapter, you'll learn a bevy of tips and tricks for writing scannable text from scratch and taking existing text and making it easy to scan.

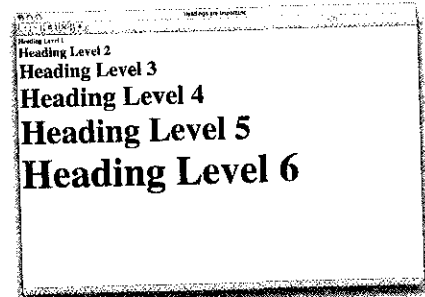
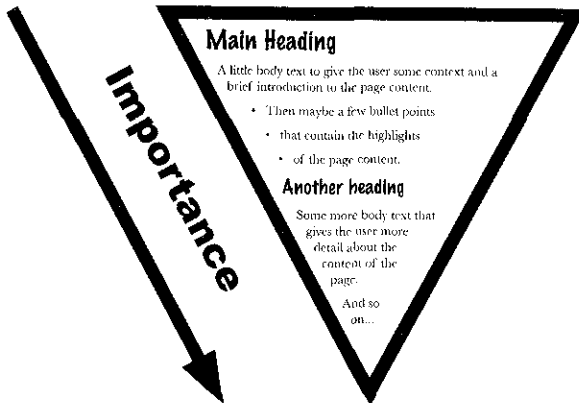
### The Hipster Intelligencer

#### Website copy

In 1972, Gary Gygax, a game designer from Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, and Don Kaim founded Tactical Studies Rules in order to publish the rules for *Cavaliers and Roundheads*, a miniature war game based in the English Civil War. While *Cavaliers and Roundheads* was the initial focus of Tactical Studies Rules, Gygax and Kaim also sought to publish the rules for *Dungeons & Dragons*, a fantasy miniature role-playing game developed by Gygax whose rules were used on Chetumal, a medieval miniature game developed by Gygax and Jeff Perren in 1971. As *Cavaliers and Roundheads* began generating revenue for Tactical Studies Rules, the partnership was expected to include Dave Arneson and Brian Blume. While Dave Arneson was brought into the partnership as a game designer, and left shortly thereafter, Brian Blume remained as a founder. Blume believed that *Cavaliers and Roundheads* was not generating enough revenue, and encouraged Gygax and Kaim to focus their efforts on releasing *Dungeons & Dragons*.

There is considerable debate as to the contributions that Dave Arneson made to the initial development of *Dungeons & Dragons*. While Arneson has labeled himself "The Father of

Build a better online newspaper	233
Hipster Intelligencer Online: Project Specs	234
The problem is TEXT	234
Improve your content with the Inverted Pyramid	241
Compress your copy	247
Add lists to your XHTML	257
Headings make your text even more scannable	259
Mix fonts to emphasize headings and other text	268
The level, not the size, of a heading conveys importance	269

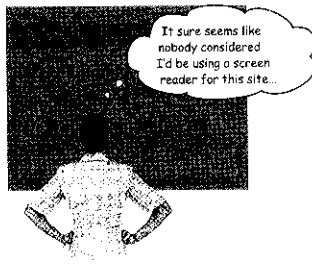
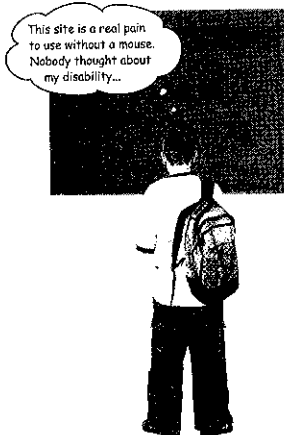


## 8

**Inaccessibility Kills****Who's missing out on experiencing your website, right now?**

You may have a beautiful, well-laid out, easily navigable site... but that doesn't mean everyone's enjoying it. Whether it's someone who's visually-impaired, or just a user who has trouble distinguishing blues from greens, your site must be **accessible**.

Otherwise, you're losing users and hurting your business. But don't worry: **accessibility isn't difficult!** By **planning the order of your markup**, using **ALT** attributes and **LONGDESC** tags, and **thinking about color**, you'll widen your audience immediately. Along the way, you may even get **WCAG certified**. What's that? Turn the page, and find out...



Audio-2-Go: inaccessible accessibility	276
Accessibility means making your site work for everyone	277
How does your site read?	278
A site's message should be clear...to everyone	280
Face it: computers are stupid!	281
A computer will read your image's ALT text	282
Convert your long ALT text to a LONGDESC	286
Your improvements are making a difference for some Audio-2-Go customers	288
Accessibility is not just about screen readers	289
Tabbing through a page should be orderly	291
Audio-2-Go is now a lot more accessible	294
WCAG Priority 1	298
Color shouldn't be your only form of communication	302
Life through web-safe eyes...	303
Life through color-blind eyes...	303
Audio-2-Go, via color-blind eyes	304
Those stars are a real problem	306
Background images are still your friend	307
There's more to ordering than just tabindexes	308

listen to your users

## The Pathway to Harmonious Design

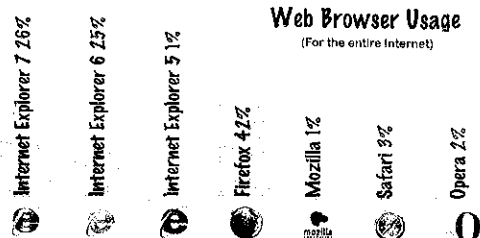
9

Good design is all about really listening to your users.

Your *users can tell you what's wrong* with your site, *what's right* with your site, *how you can fix things* (if necessary) and *how you can improve your site*. There are lots of ways you can listen to your users. You can **listen to them in groups** (using tools like surveys), listen to them **individually** (with tools such as usability tests), and listen to their **collective actions on your site** (with tools such as site metrics and statistics). Whatever method you use, its all about "hearing" what your users are saying. If you do, your site will meet the needs of your audience and be that much better for it.

	PROS	CONS
Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Require a relatively short time commitment from survey participants</li><li>Can be administered to a large number of people</li><li>Can be administered in lots of ways: paper, online, by phone, in person</li><li>Participants can often complete the survey at their own leisure</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Require a lot of advance planning</li><li>Written surveys may present problems for lower literate users</li><li>Survey questions might be misinterpreted</li></ul>
Focus groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Allow participants to build on each other's ideas</li><li>Collect information on a very specific topic from those who have a stake in the topic</li><li>Benefits from a trained facilitator</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Require longer time commitment from participants</li><li>Usually require compensation for the participants</li><li>Public environment may intimidate some participants</li><li>Requires a trained facilitator</li></ul>

Problems over at RPM	320
Let your audience speak to you through focus groups and surveys	322
Surveys and focus groups aren't free	325
Surveys Exposed	327
Ask the right questions in your surveys	328
The final RPM Music user survey	338
The results are in!	340
Responses to the open-ended question:	341
Web Browser Usage	343
Fix RPM's CSS bug by moving the hover property	344
The building blocks of budget usability testing	351
Use a moderator script to organize the test	352
Friends and family can be a problem	359
The results of the usability test--what the users are telling you	360
A simple problem...	361
Site stats give your users (another) voice	363
Website analytics tools	364



# 10

## evolutionary design

### Keeping your site fresh

So, you've built a bunch of awesome websites. Now it's time to kick back, relax, and watch the visitor numbers grow, right? Whoa, not so fast. *The web never stops evolving*—and your site needs to keep up. You can **add new features**, **tweak the design**, or even **do a complete redesign**. An ever-changing site reflects your growing skills—which means ***your site is always your best PR tool.***



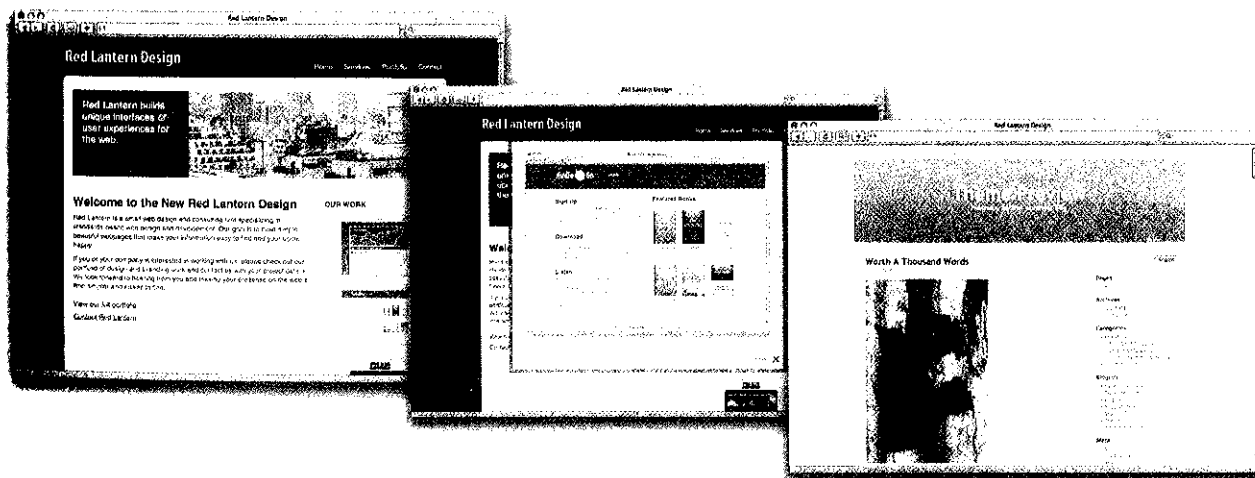
Flash



jQuery JavaScript  
library



Your portfolio so far...	370
Keeping your site and content fresh keeps your users coming back	372
Web design is about evolution, not revolution	375
Use CSS to evolve your site's design	376
Use JavaScript lightboxes to add interactivity to your site	388
Add Facebox to the Red Lantern homepage	389
Edit your index file	390
Adding blog functionality with WordPress	395
Add a WordPress blog to the Red Lantern site	396
Blog Exposed	398
Change the look and feel of your blog with themes	400



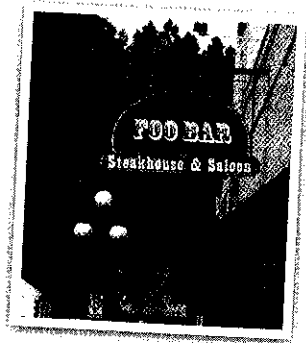
# the business of web design

## Mind Your Own Business

# 11

### Business in a web design book? Are you kidding me?

You've mastered pre-production, information architecture, navigation, color, and even accessibility. What's left in your path to web design mastery? Well, you're going to have to tackle the business issues of web design. You don't need a Harvard MBA, but you better know more than just where you deposit your check... or those checks may stop coming. Let's look at establishing good client relationships and understanding your intellectual property rights. The result? Increased profits and protection for your hard work.



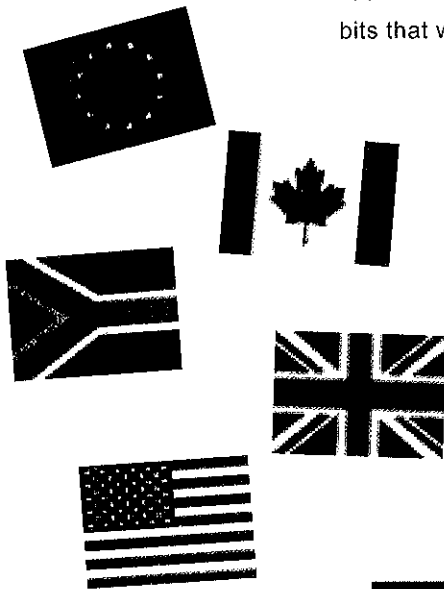
The newest potential client: the Foo Bar	404
What Foo Bar wants in a bid	405
Let's build a quick mockup for the Foo Bar	406
Welcome to the world of Design Piracy	413
What kind of web worker are you?	416
Red Lantern's got a new prospective client	421
What really goes into designing a website?	424
Figure out a total bid...	425
Use a proposal letter to deliver a detailed quote to a client	431
The Trilobite podcast: a(nother) new challenge	433
Use Creative Commons to license your work	433
Creative Commons Licenses	434

Client Requirements		Pre-production Time:	
Item	Hours	Rate	Total
<input type="checkbox"/> A new 400x200px 1000x1000px web page, a custom page with three separate columns.	2	\$	
<input type="checkbox"/> Several different designs (pages) to look at for the client. And an ability to provide design feedback, then we get incorporated into the final file.	2	\$	
<input type="checkbox"/> Standard template code. I'd like to see that so we can use it as a reference.	2	\$	
<input type="checkbox"/> Some type of content plan for the production timeline. To make sure we're getting all the content that we need.	2	\$	
<input type="checkbox"/> Use the code for testing, make sure there are no problems with the code.	2	\$	
<b>Red Lantern Project Estimation Worksheet (RLEPW)</b>		<b>Crafts and Design Revisions:</b>	
<b>Job Description:</b> Client Name: _____ Project Description: _____		<b>Client Meetings:</b> Design Meetings: _____ Designboard Revisions: _____	
<b>Initial Input Time:</b> Client Meetings: _____ Background Research: _____ Taxes: _____		<b>Production Time:</b> XHTML and CSS: _____ Backend Programming: _____ Graphics and Artwork: _____ Copywriting: _____ Validation and Debugging: _____	
<b>Miscellaneous Expenses:</b> Fonts and Graphics: _____ Software: _____ General Supplies: _____		<b>Totals:</b> Total Project Time: _____ Total Cost: _____	

## The Top Ten Things (we didn't cover)

i

**We've really covered a lot of ground in this book.** The thing is, there are some important topics and tidbits that didn't quite fit into any of the previous chapters. We feel pretty strongly about these, and think that if we didn't at least cover them in passing, we'd be doing you a disservice. That is where this chapter comes into the picture. Well, its not really a chapter, its more like an appendix (ok, it *is* an appendix). But it's an awesome appendix of the top ten best bits that we couldn't let you go without.



#1: Cross-cultural & international design	440
#2: The future of Web markup	442
#3: The future of CSS	444
#4: Designing for mobile devices	445
#5: Developing Web applications	446
#6: Rhythm in your layout	447
#7: Text contrast	448
#8: Match link names with their destination page	449
#9: Contrast is a fundamental layout device	450
#10: More tools for design	451

However, the potential of the web to deliver full-scale applications didn't hit the mainstream till Google introduced Gmail, quickly followed by Google Maps, web-based applications with rich user interfaces and PC-equivalent interactivity. The collection of technologies used by Google christened AJAX, in a seminal essay by Jesse Garrett of web design firm Adaptive Path.

The bursting of the dot-com bubble in the fall of 2001 marked a turning point for the web. Many people concluded that the web was overhyped, when, in fact, bubbles and consequent shakeouts appear to be a common feature of all technological revolutions. Shakeouts typically mark the point at which an ascendant technology is ready to take its place at center stage.

[illegible]