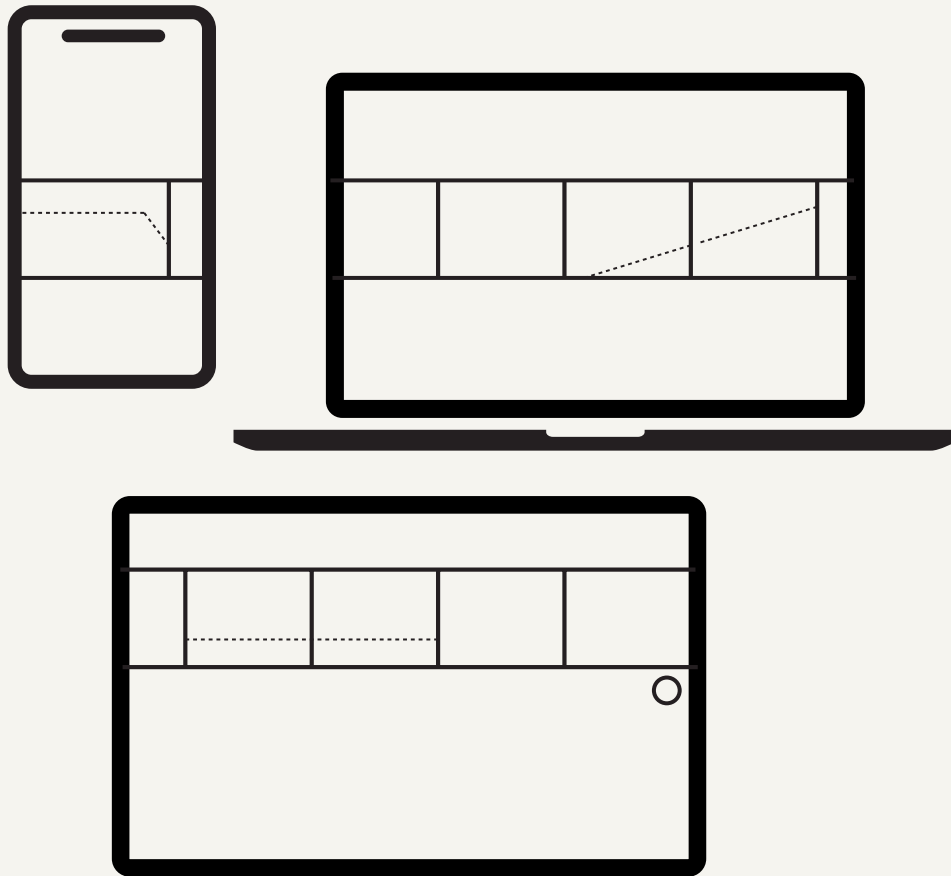# Even When It's Digital,
It's Still An Experience

Even When It's Digital,
It's Still An Experience

The website is a part of the customer/member experience. Obvious enough right? So why are so many websites, especially banking websites, poorly designed experiences? This will not be a discussion about bad website design, rather a discussion on how we approached the design of digital experience in some recent projects with comparisons to common challenges in other experiences.

We had a few overlapping projects for new online experiences, ranging from retail banking to art to cannabis. We keep up on the latest research and always spend extra time studying the conditions more as we begin a project, but we decided to invite a bunch people into our studio and watch them browse websites. We provided a few sites and then let them freestyle for a bit and asked that they narrate their thinking. There were a few things we noticed. This is a short discussion on some of learnings and how we approached the design for these digital experiences.

We approached our site designs through the lens of first, why the user is on the site coupled with how to realize the content for them in a way that is engaging and valuable. Here are our four points.
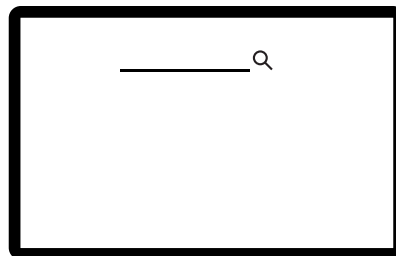

1. Don't hide the type-search

Lesson one, understand the value of type-search. One of the key observations we identified was the way younger users were more prone to search, via type, than the older users who scrolled and browsed in a more traditional manner. When younger users entered a site for the first time, they didn't always scroll, in fact in our observations they tended to not move beyond the first visible area. Younger users did not automatically scroll down as older users tended to do. If prompted to simulate a type of browse or shop, the younger users would perform a type-search for what they were seeking. Older audiences we observed tended to scroll and click. They also used search, but it was more secondary at best, and for a lot of sites they struggled to find the type-search. In our review of websites we noticed that most sites hide the search

Even When It's Digital,
It's Still An Experience

feature, not intentionally, but it is often small and placed out far to the side. We realized how silly it is to ask people to scroll and browse for what they wanted, when it would be much easier to simply type a few words. One thing to add to this is to also invest in a good search capability for your site. It is surprising how poor search is on some sites, with search results not even providing results for the primary content on the site.
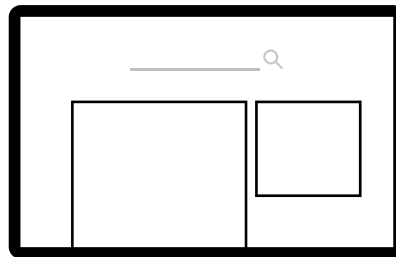
2. Drop the animated banner

The other interesting observation was the value of the landing page, most critical to younger users since they were less likely to scroll down. From our research users are not fans of animated banners. They want the critical information immediately and did not care for the animated banners. The animated banner is an attempt to present a range of information to the visitor, but it more often is a distraction than an asset. We are not fans of automatically animated content in general on sites, as it distracts and can confuse the user, but we do feel it depends on the type of website. Some sites may benefit from animated content, but it should intentionally be part of the experience and not something only for marketing and seeking to grab attention. Plus, the animated banner assumes the user is sitting there waiting for the next slide. In our user study, they simply ignored the banner.
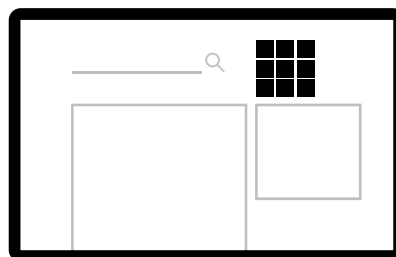
3. Offer a speed-rack, but only one

A speed-rack is a bartending term that refers to the row of bottles hung immediately below the counter on the bartender side of the bar. The rack traditionally consisted of approximately 7-10 liquor types, such as

Even When It's Digital,
It's Still An Experience

vodka, gin, rum, etc. These liquors were the most common used in drinks, allowing the bartender to make most drink requests by simply grabbing from the immediate speed rack. Drinks have become much more complicated and varied, this was before mixology was a term and before bartenders were as revered for their creativity as chefs, but the speed-rack is still a key tool for efficiency and ease of use. The concept of the speed-rack in online navigation is to define what are the most common navigation needs/requests and to provide a navigation bar with those select options. The idea is to not offer all the options, as it would overwhelm the screen and the user. This is common on website design, but too often navigation speed-racks are copied from other websites, so they are not necessarily the most useful for that site but rather the most common across many sites. The other issue we often see is sites that have multiple speed-racks. For example, there will be a navigation bar at the top of the screen, another at the left, another at the bottom, and even sometimes another at the right. Too often, each of these nav bars are designed differently to make them distinct resulting in clutter and confusion on the side of the user. Having multiple navigation bars belies the intent to reduce clutter and confusion. Design should always be about simplicity, "make it as simple as possible and no simpler." See our Short Six for more on this Albert Einstein quote.

Our approach is to place the search line as a prominent feature, and to limit the navigation bars. We rely more on successive, or sequential navigation, rather than everything all at once. Since the younger user defaults to an input search and goes direct to their need/want, for the browsing user we could offer limited options, which upon selection of one gets the user to another limited set. This is the same thing that the original iPod did well; the screen had no more than five navigation options with each leading to a second screen that again had no more than five options until the destination was reached. We always offer a single click from the landing page to a full contents page that works as an index in the back of a book but with a click-through option. In most instances there are a few things that must occur at the top of every page, but the challenge is to keep this to the smallest amount to offer a cleaner and more easily navigated interface. The header tends to be the best place for these with a minimal design that has presence but is not overly competitive with the page content.

4. Make it relevant, or at least tangible

As stated earlier, it is critical to understand why people are visiting your website. There are multiple reasons across many users, but there tends to be a basic commonality of most users into a few key visit purposes. Too many websites are signs, or digital brochures, and lack a designed experience.

Even When It's Digital,
It's Still An Experience

Make your content relevant. Find a way to uniquely present who you are and what you share. Consider the person you are engaging and seeking to have a dialogue with and build an experience. For a recent digital experience for a credit union we translated content they had from a monthly newsletter into a navigation tool. We navigated through member stories. Rather than simply show four checking account options, we first presented a member and a short story about how they lived, and the type of accounts that worked best for them. This provided a narrative introduction to the products, making the products tangible relative to how they live and a helpful guide for their selection. This methodology was used throughout the site, offering a experience more akin to reading a lifestyle magazine than shopping for bank products.