

Hello, here's my website....

by Jacqueline Crane

Everywhere you go you're bound to run into someone you know, haven't seen in a while, or just happened to meet and click with. Hopefully, it's an agent or editor, but what do you do? Ask them for their contact info, of course, so you can keep in touch. Okay, maybe you normally would scrawl their phone number hastily on a napkin or save it in your cell phone address book. These days, you'll discover that most everyone you meet will be quick to whip out their business card, while nonchalantly informing you they have a website. That's true, folks. Websites have become the résumé and calling cards of this century.

After I politely thank the person for their business card, the first thing I do when I get home is fire up my computer and type in the web address. Maybe I'm an oddball, but I tend to be curious about the site's design and content. Most importantly, I want to learn more about the person or their business. Okay, sometimes it's because I can't remember who they are, and I'm hoping the con-

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tent on the site will jar my memory.

What I've discovered from the numerous sites I've visited is that a majority of them are self-created. As I click through the pages, I usually end up evaluating the site. I don't mean to be so critical about what I see, but I can't help noticing a dozen ways they could have tweaked their design or layout to improve the look, navigation, and feel of their site. I have a desire to call up the person and give them friendly tips on making their site shine. Well, as a graphic and web designer my thoughts and actions are purely habitual...promise! (So please forgive me, dear friends, possibly now foes, whom I have contacted and forced to listen to my long-winded explanations, ideas, and suggestions.)

With all the web surfing I've done, it's easy for me to remember common web "no-no's" that stick out in my mind. I'm no authority on websites, by any means, but during my stint as a Creative Director, I picked up a thing or two that may prove to be helpful. Here are a few "do's" and "don't" that can help you when you think about creating your professional or personal website.

GISS (Keep It Simple, Silly)

As an aspiring author, I must have seen every kind of author site imaginable. I've gone through the entire RWA author and member's list...as well as browsed through a gazillion links listed on other author sites. The one big problem I see on these sites is the incredible amounts of information authors provide. Time is limited and no one really has the time to read everything you've posted. These pages are so cluttered, you wouldn't know where to begin and where the site ends. Frankly, you don't need to include every book review,



award, writing sample, or bits and pieces of news about yourself or photos taken from the last thirty years, unless it's absolutely necessary. If your objective is to have a professional site, too much information dumping may not hold a person's attention for more than ten minutes.

Simplicity is key, folks.

Simple design will go a long way and you'll find it quite pleasing to the eye for anyone who is browsing your pages. Just because it's simple doesn't mean it will be unattractive, boring, or plain. Simplicity can show your elegance, professionalism, and uniqueness without being overstated.

Sure enough, fancy, flashy animation, floating objects, or complicated navigation may be entertaining—well, maybe for the first few minutes, but it easily becomes an annoyance and you can't wait to skip through the bells and whistles to get to the meat of the site.

You'll find simple sites are more appealing to the eye than sites that are burdened with the weight of heavy graphics that affect your page loads. The most important thing to remember: simple designs can be viewed successfully in almost any platform or web browser.

Simplicity can prove to be timeless.



CONSISTENCY (from page-to-page)

Years ago when I started web design, I slapped together my own personal website. Okay, I wanted to be innovative and thought I was ingenious. In truth, I let my imagination run amuck. I wanted to break all the rules of web design by creating masterpiece collages within my website. After months of design and implementation, I e-mailed every family member, relative, and friend I could think of. Then, I made the mistake of e-mailing my web link to my designer friends. Nothing beats hearing brutally honest opinions.

The main criticism was that every page looked different. After a few clicks they felt like they were lost in an entirely new site and had to click the back button to make sure it was still mine. They told me they loved my use of colors and design before they kindly deposited book after book into my arms that focused on the topic of web design.

I decided to take the hint and re-design my site in order to maintain a consistent look from page to page. In addition, I made certain I had a consistent navigation scheme to make it easier for people to get through the pages quickly and conveniently with-

out a need to search for the navigation.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Here are a few examples of things you should avoid on your website.

1. Losing focus – counters, weather and stock tickers, and flashing animated objects aren't necessary, and may make your site appear amateurish.

2. Filling your site with “coming soon” pages – never launch your site without finishing it. You wouldn't hand over an unfinished manuscript to an editor or agent, would you?

3. Using music on your website (unless you're in a band!) – the repetitious music would eventually drive those viewing your site away, especially without a “music off” button.

4. Using a hit counter – it's not necessary to keep track of how many people view your site each day. This isn't a popularity contest. Nowadays your hosting company tracks every hit, URL pointers, and supply statistics on countries where the clicks are coming from.

5. Hosting your site on a free, advertising-based service – it's okay to do a free site if you're showing your family, but if you want to be taken seriously as a writer or professional you don't want pop ups and banners with inappropriate ads to be visible. Your website reflects you as a professional and operates as your resume. You don't dress sloppy to a job interview, so you don't want your website to give off signals that you don't really care about your business or you're too cheap to get a professional site up. It's okay for you to start off with a free site if you can't afford a professional one yet, but keep in mind it's a good investment in the long run.

6. Hiring an amateur designer and expecting a professional website – research and look at portfolio samples of web and graphic designers before com-

mitting to a designer. Don't go with the first company you find. Check rates and get feedback from people who have used these designers. Chances are you know someone who could refer you to a good, inexpensive web designer. Find a person that is willing to work with you to produce the best site possible—and the end product is representative of who you are.

Lastly, if you have an active lifestyle it may be too difficult to continually maintain your site. Make sure your site stays current to keep people's interest. You may want to find a designer that will maintain your website for you if you can't do it yourself. Consistent updates will keep you fresh in the search engines for those who may query your name. Maybe add a blog (web log) or change out information on a weekly basis. This will keep your site fresh and others will be eager to return to it.

Whether you decide to design a website yourself or go with a professional to get the job done, you should try to avoid those common mistakes as outlined in this article, browse through other sites for examples, and weigh your options before you proceed in building your web site.

Jacqueline Crane, aka Jax, has worked as a staff writer for several local independent music and entertainment magazines in Orlando, Florida. She owns a graphic and web design business, Jaxadora Design, which specializes in author websites. Jax has written fourteen screenplays, a paranormal romance, and is currently working on a contemporary gothic romance. In 2004 she was elected Treasurer of the Los Angeles Romance Authors and is the co-founder and web designer of Romance Divas, an award winning online romance writer's resource and forum.

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