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## Upfront

### Designing Trust

**Spiffy Web sites aren't just easy on the eyes; they're also easier to believe and learn from**

By Rosaline Juan

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## Designing Trust

*Spiffy Web sites aren't just easy on the eyes; they're also easier to believe and learn from*

Having worked on more than 30 e-commerce sites, designer Erika Clary has learned a thing or two about what makes a corporate Web site effective. She is now transferring her skills to the nonprofit world, designing Web sites for San Francisco Bay Area nonprofits such as SF Connect, a new organization that mobilizes volunteers.

"Getting buyers to contribute money is really the same thing as selling something online," she says. Both require well-organized content, a professional appearance, and intuitive navigation.

An article published in the August 2006 issue of the *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing* reaches the same conclusion. The article's authors, Mary M. Long and Larry Chiagouris (both of whom are associate professors of marketing at Pace University's Lubin School of Business), conducted the first large-scale, quantitative study of what makes visitors like and trust nonprofit Web sites. They found that a Web site's design – its overall appearance and ease of navigation – influences not only how much users like the site, but also how much they trust it.

According to Chiagouris, "Our findings demonstrate that it's not just cosmetics, but the way the site is organized that has a significant impact on how users viewed the site and ultimately the nonprofit brand." He adds that although the findings were not a surprise, "we certainly didn't anticipate nearly the level of impact design would have on credibility measures."

In their study, the researchers asked 262 U.S. adults to spend four to five minutes interacting with the Web sites of two nonprofits: the American Red Cross and the American Cancer Society. Users then completed a questionnaire to indicate how much they liked each site, as well as how credible, secure, and trustworthy they found it.

The results indicate that although

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participants felt that the American Red Cross and American Cancer Society were equally respected organizations, they not only liked, but also trusted the Red Cross site more. Superior design elements, such as how professional the site appeared, how well organized the content was, and how easy it was for users to find information, made the Red Cross site more likable and credible than the American Cancer Society site.

"The major takeaway of our research is that design is absolutely crucial," says Long. She encourages nonprofits to adopt a tried-and-true method for improving their site designs: Get target audiences to test them.

This method has proven effective for the American Cancer Society, which has tested and changed its Web site multiple times since this study was conducted. In the last year alone, the organization has redesigned its Web site three times on the basis of extensive user testing, says Adam Pellegrini, national director of online strategy for the American Cancer Society.

"Six months ago, before we did a major revamp of the home page, it would take you six or seven clicks just to find out about breast cancer if you took one path," notes Pellegrini. "We had to find the most intuitive path. Now you can get there in just two or three clicks."

As a result of its improved design, the site has seen an increase in visitors from more than 7 million to more than 16 million. Visitors also stay at the site longer after landing on the home page, says Pellegrini.

Although Pellegrini and Clary were already practicing what Long and Chiagouris' findings suggest they should, they nonetheless found the research useful. "Oftentimes in any company, there are deadlines, pressures, and one of the areas that's skipped is usability testing," says Pellegrini. For him, the research reinforces the importance of professional design and the need for user testing. Likewise, Clary believes that the research article is "a very valuable tool" for nonprofits, and so she plans to post the study on her Web site for her clients to read and use. —*Rosaline Juan*