

Home sweet home!

When people type your website name into their browser they land on your home page – so what do you do to keep them on your website now you've got them?

Firstly, make sure that there's something to connect with them quickly. People don't start reading at the top of the page; their eyes tend to connect with the screen about a third of the way down. That's where your headline needs to go.

At the top of the page you need to have your company identity, your logo, the organisation name and a strap line (slogan) if you have one. This is sometimes called the 'masthead' and this needs to be the same on every page of your website, it's what reassures your visitors that they are still on the same site, however, it's not something they look at, rather something that is in their peripheral vision.

Your headline will sit underneath this and it needs to be big enough to stand out and to attract attention. So not 14 point bold – it needs to be at least 18 point and it needs to be in the middle of a white space so it stands out.

You might be surprised to know that people don't read on the screen, they scan picking up odd words here and there. They'll read the headline and possibly the first paragraph, then the eye skims down the left hand side of the text until about half way down the text when there is a tendency to skim across the page and back, then the eye continues down the left hand side. So people read the screen in an 'F' pattern.

To encourage people to read the key pieces of information there are a few things you can do.

- Short paragraphs encourage people to read more.
- Left align the text, don't justify the text into blocks.
- Highlight key words in **bold**, but don't go mad with too many bold words.
- Turn key points into a bullet point list; people read lists when they don't read paragraphs.

When you write your copy remember to talk about your reader rather than yourself. Keep it short and to the point, encourage your reader to explore your website further by telling them about the solutions you are providing.

Ideally, if you can get your information onto one screen, that's going to make it easy for your visitor (scrolling down takes effort!); however, you shouldn't have more than two screens.

As most of us follow the eye with the mouse, your mouse arrives at the bottom of the page at the same time your eye does, so make sure that there is a call to action in the last paragraph. If you don't tell your visitor what to do, there's a good chance they won't do anything.

Not only do you need to tell people what to do, but you also need to make it easy for them – give them a hyperlink to click – don't make them work hard to go where you want them to go next.

You should know what you want people to do when they've 'read' each page of the website. Getting them to phone you or email when they've only read the home page probably isn't very realistic, but getting them to explore your products or services page is a pretty good bet.

As to the rest of the page stick to what people are familiar with – menu on the left or across the top (underneath the masthead, but above the headline). Don't clutter the page up with lots of boxes, lots of choices and too much information – you'll only confuse people.

If you've got log in or sign up boxes the best place for them is under the masthead on the right hand side. That's where most of us feel most comfortable filling in the necessary form. Don't ask people for any more information than necessary – user name (or email address) and password are all you need.

One final word – about visuals! Visuals are great, they make the page more interesting, BUT – they must work for their living. Visuals should help you to get your message across, not be nasty stock photos of people doing something vaguely businessy, or pretty pictures of plant life or fish or fruit. If it doesn't help you to make your point, leave it out.

Worse still don't let your web designer go mad with flash media. Anything that moves – and continues to move – is a distraction from the message you're hoping they'll get. If you have to have something that moves, make sure it moves once and then stays put.

If you want to make your home page as sticky as possible – follow these tips and you won't go far wrong.

... and finally

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You can contact Lesley on +44 1245 473296 or Lesley@insidenews.co.uk or visit the Inside News website at www.insidenews.co.uk.

