

## Web branding is more than skin deep

Web branding is much more about function than image. Great websites put substance before flash. This reflects a knowledge society that has become more rational in how it makes decisions.

First things first, emotion still rules our lives. No matter how many facts we gather before we make a particular decision, we will always be heavily influenced by our feelings. Beauty still adds sparkle to our lives, and when style and function combine that's an irresistible combination.

Somewhere along the line, branding lost its way. It became rigidly linked to a narrow focus on creating marketing messages that spoke to surface emotions. Branding became all about image in some people's eyes. A lot of marketing and advertising became a process of telling pleasant lies. The idea was to create a fantastic fiction out of the product.

There is no better example of this sort of marketing than how many cars are promoted. The reality is that of most of us car drivers spend increasing amounts of our time in traffic jams.

The fiction we see on TV is empty streets or some vast expanse of land where shimmering water splashes spectacularly as the wheels of these enticing dream machines zoom through.

There's nothing wrong with a bit of fantasy and, if it makes us feel better, what's the harm? The problem is that, in some minds, branding has become intrinsically linked with this sort of fantasy marketing. To some, the essence of the brand is its logo and its colors, and the only way to communicate the brand is through soft focus images and majestic music.

On the Web, branding is being brought back to basics. Brands that succeed there need to prove their worth (Google, Yahoo, Amazon, eBay, etc.). There are two key reasons for this.

The first is that the Web is a very functional place. It's a self-service environment where people are focused on completing specific tasks. If you want to be a really successful brand on the Web, your website needs to be convenient and fast, and you need to discount.

The second reason is that people are less gullible today. Just because I have a Nokia phone doesn't mean I'm loyal to Nokia. Next year, when I change my phone I'll shop around. In the past, people were much more loyal to brands. Today, people are less so because they are asking a simple question: What's in it for me?

People are more informed today than they have ever been. That fancy TV ad for that wonderful car may indeed catch their attention, but when they come to the Web they want to check up its safety rating.

The Web is a wonderful place for brands that can deliver genuine value. Google is a global brand today, not because of its multi-colored logo, but because it helps people quickly find things they need.

The Web challenges the brand to do something useful. The brand can't hide behind clever, gimmicky marketing. It has to stand up and deliver. Quality, usefulness, value, convenience-these are the attributes consumers demand of web brands.

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*Lesley Morrissey is an expert in readability and specialises in helping people to develop a website that works for their business.*

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