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Pixels vs. Paper

taking your annual online

Nine out of 10 Fortune 500 companies have taken their annual reports to the Web. Surveys of analysts and investors confirm that online annuals are an important part of an effective investor relations strategy. Once your online annual is designed and produced, posting it on the Web allows access by anyone interested in your company, anytime, with no additional effort on your part.

These are compelling reasons to provide an online version of your company's annual report. But if you're unfamiliar with the finer details of Internet technology, managing the production of your company's online annual may seem like a daunting task, simply because you don't know what to expect.

Relax – you can produce a successful online annual even if it's your first time. We'll smooth some potential bumps along the road by discussing key ways print and online annuals differ. We'll also give you pointers on some common trouble spots and in general share experience gained over several years of developing online annuals.

It's Just Like Producing a Printed Annual, Isn't It?

Well, yes and no. The design and construction of an online annual report have several considerations that differ from those of its print counterpart. The largest of these is the type of visitor, or end user, who will be navigating through the annual. Other differences to keep in mind include fonts, color and construction.

Understanding the End User

It's impossible to predict exactly who will view your online annual, and with what computer. So, it's always good to have an idea of who your typical visitor might be so that you can determine the best way to communicate your message. If a company is on the leading edge, with a very tech-savvy audience, its online annual may not hold visitors' interest if it uses only the most basic type and financial tables. In this instance, the audience would probably expect more from the company. It's important to make sure the design, functionality and content of your online annual are in sync with who you are as a company.

By the same token, if you believe that your visitors and prospective investors are less comfortable with their computers, it could be a disservice to include content that requires uncommon browser plug-ins or that must be viewed using the latest version of a browser.

Understanding Fonts on the Web

Developing an online annual report that resembles the look of the printed version is a common design objective. When it comes to matching the font of a print annual report, this goal may be difficult to achieve in the online version without introducing challenges and problems that outweigh the benefits.

The way type is created and how it behaves in online projects are both very different from printed type. There are two kinds of type treatments you'll see on the Web: live text and text images. Live text is simply typed into the Web pages when they are created, much as text is typed into a Word document. Text images are created in an image-editing program, then placed into Web pages by the Web developer.

In general, when building any Web site it is a good idea to use live text as much as possible rather than text images. Live text loads very quickly into visitors' Web browsers and is sharper and easier to read than text images. A disadvantage of live text, however, is that while you can specify the font the browser should use when it displays your Web page, your visitors' computer settings have ultimate control over the page. In other words, the font you see displayed on your screen will not necessarily be what visitors see on their screens.

Text images can add emphasis and visual interest to pages, but are best limited to introductory copy and headings. This is because text images are downloaded to your browser like photographs or other images and may unacceptably increase the amount of time visitors must wait for the page to load into the browser window. While the ability to control the appearance of the text is a plus, the more images used on a page, the longer the loading time. Another drawback of text images is that, at smaller type sizes, the text becomes fuzzier and more difficult to read. In addition, compared to editing live text, editing text images is more time-consuming. We recommend using them only where more style is needed than plain live text would offer.

Understanding Colors on the Web

Matching colors from your print annual in your online annual is sometimes difficult and often impossible. With printed projects, virtually any color can be created. In contrast, Web browsers are only capable of displaying 256 colors. After excluding colors that are exclusive to Macintosh computers and still others exclusive to Windows machines, a meager 216 colors are left. This

so-called "Web-Safe 216" palette is heavy on greens and sorely lacking in softer pastel colors. In addition, there is frequently still some variation between computers in most of the 216 colors. It is possible to use non-Web-safe colors in your online annual, but there will be a color shift that will vary from machine to machine – often drastically. This is why colors used in the print annual are often adapted – and sometimes changed – to create a harmonious, but Web-safe, look.

Understanding the Construction of Web Pages

We're not about to try to give you a crash course in Web programming, but it is important to note that the way Web pages are assembled is quite different from the way pages are created for a print project. In general, this is because the underpinnings of the World Wide Web are based on technologies that make Web pages readable by virtually anyone, on any computer, with any browser. The use of this technology, however, sometimes means accepting some compromises.

Unlike printed pages, online annuals can vary in appearance depending upon the computer they're viewed on. Live type can't be fixed into position, so lines can break at different points depending on visitors' browser settings. Everything that makes up a Web page – copy, images, special effects – must be included in the page by using a language, or code, the Web browser can understand. While it's possible to do much more with this code today in comparison to even a few years ago, there are still times when a particular design or bit of programming can cause unexpected results. Sometimes your Web developer can identify trouble spots in a proposed design and can suggest workarounds. Occasionally it isn't until the site moves into production that problems are discovered. Rather than being married to a specific idea, it's usually best to think about the overall objective of the problematic area and work with the Web developer to create a solution that meets that objective.

Achieving Successful Results

Creating eye-catching but quick-loading pages. Reproducing the official company color. Using the same font as that of the printed annual. It is sometimes frustrating to Web developers, designers and their clients alike that seemingly simple requests like these can in reality involve a lot more than what might be initially apparent. It may be that the desired effect is feasible but out of range of the budget. Or, frequently, a requested change impacts the layout or programming of several parts of the site.

The best way to help your Web development team to produce an online annual that looks and performs the way you'd like is to communicate your company's objectives and ideas at the start of the project. In combination with your team's expertise, this input will help produce an online annual that lives up to your expectations. As you've probably gathered, it's impossible to create Web pages that look exactly the same on every computer. But that doesn't mean a good Web developer won't keep tweaking until your company's online annual looks its best.