

## Language e-evolves

**Unlike dead words on paper, words on the web are living things. They can, effectively, talk back, guide you and show you around...**

Any new medium is problematic initially. It is the intrinsic newness that overwhelmingly excites – but also perplexes. In time though, all new media evolve into stand-alone cultural elements, leaving behind what went before.

Take the early days of movies. There were no close-ups, panoramic shots or subtle nuances of mood – the camera was static. In fact, what the first moviegoers saw was on-screen theatre.

This is because early directors only understood theatre and had to learn about “frame” - the crucial aspect that separates film from stage drama. By the same token, the earliest watchers of television saw radio with pictures. It took 25 years until TV directors properly understood the power of the image alone and could use it to full effect.

Now the internet is at a crucial stage of its evolution. So far, we’ve used words on a screen as we would words on a page. But this denies the internet its unique cultural identity that will separate it from printed media forever.

**This key element is conversation. We can strike up a dialogue with the screen, ask it questions and it will answer.**

Because of this, traditional linguistic communication must evolve to fully accommodate everything the internet is capable of.

Straightforward print text doesn’t work online for a number of reasons. The human eye processes different information in different ways. Web users read about 25 per cent more slowly from screens than from paper. To make up for this lack of speed we tend to scan for key words and phrases.

At the very least, short paragraphs, fewer and clearer words should be used. But the way internet users read should more radically affect what text we decide to place online.

There’s the fluidity of the internet to consider. Rather than turn pages in a specific order, people make their own way through the data; entering a site at any page and moving between pages as they choose.



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This in turn means that each page should be written without assumptions about a previous page having already been read.

Also, rather than passively absorbing information as we would while reading a brochure, we actively pursue the data to which the words lead.

**The literacy of language diminishes and instead it becomes a textual interface.**

While working for our clients we discovered that words on their websites are not just for passing on information. They're also navigation points that let people to find their way around. Words are signposts and guides; they're not just there to simply impart information in the same way as a brochure would.

The internet is an active medium. A brochure is something that contains writing to be passively consumed. It's the difference between reading quietly in a library and chatting to a friend in a bar. A website has to talk to people, to anticipate their questions and have an answer ready, and to help them get to where they want to go.

The best websites, therefore, are those that offer people a positive, controlled experience. Logging on to a good website should be like wandering into a great shop. They lead you from one area to another with subtle direction. They ask, "How can we help you find what you want?" An assistant would never approach you in a shop saying, "We've got iPods." They would say, "Can I help you? What are you interested in?"

The worst websites are those which offer no advice as to where you should go, leaving people to rummage around and possibly find something useful if, by chance, they happen to go the right way.

**Online it 'looks' like reading - but behaves like a conversation.**

**The not so small print**

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