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Goldin Ceramics: Website as Primary Advertising Vehicle for Small Business

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Goldin Ceramics:

Website as Primary Advertising Vehicle for Small Business

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Abstract

I wanted my Honors Capstone Project to capitalize on the combination of advertising, design, and website-building skills I have gained both inside and outside of the classroom during my time at Syracuse University. I wanted the chance to apply my conceptual knowledge as well as my knowledge of advanced design and website software to an actual client with measurable results. I decided to tackle the challenge of creating a new website for my aunt's small business, Goldin Ceramics. Since Olga's only method of advertising is in-person at craft shows that she attends roughly once a month, her website plays a crucial role at reaching consumers who are unable to attend these shows but still want to purchase her products.

After analyzing her current website (http://www.olgagoldin.com), I realized that I would have to start from scratch. The website was not graphically pleasing, lacked proper structure, and had a higher likelihood of turning users away from desired behavior (purchase). The product categories were not organized in a logical fashion and the photos were poor in quality. In addition, the entire website was built in Java script, making it virtually invisible to search engines.

In order to gain a better understanding of what makes a website functional, I consulted the opinions of my professors, read online articles regarding people's online browsing habits, and learned about search engine optimization (SEO). I used Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, Dreamweaver, and Flash in order to create a new web page design, edit product photos, build an interactive navigation menu, and write copy in a manner to make the website searchable. The entire process was time-consuming, tedious, but ultimately rewarding.

The resulting website (http://www.goldinceramics.com) is graphically pleasing, functional, quick to load, easy to navigate, and capitalizes on the concept of SEO. Olga's work is organized in an orderly fashion and the ability for visitors to choose the order in which to view images provides a rewarding, gallery-like experience for potential consumers. Additionally, the new order form provides visitors the chance to specify which product they want their personalized piece to be modeled after and a space for an extensive description. The addition of a Google search bar also makes it easy for consumers to find the pieces they are looking for immediately.

Olga's current consumers will be pleased with this new website and the press releases I will write and distribute once the website goes live will drive generate traffic and increase sales.

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Reflective Essay

Introduction

I wanted my final Honors Capstone Project to reflect all of the skills I have gained during my college years; both inside and outside of the classroom. My Advertising major has made me really passionate about branding and made me realize just how important a brand is to any product and service. Great businesses can be overlooked if their brand image isn't up to par with its competition. Unfortunately, most of the clients I've worked on during my educational career have been established in the market place and I've never gotten a chance to build a brand from the bottom up. However, I knew that I had the advertising, psychology, technical, and design skills to make it happen.

Over the past four years, I have been actively learning how to use the Adobe Creative Suite 3 software including Illustrator, Photoshop, and InDesign, as well as Dreamweaver and Flash. I am one of those people who gets really excited when I learn new software and love to put my skills to good use whenever possible. Learning Flash this final semester of my senior year certainly opened my eyes to the possibilities of web design and made me want to create a website for a real client that would greatly benefit from my hard work. After giving it some thought, I realized that my own Aunt Olga's business, Goldin Ceramics, has never had a strong online presence. I was ready for a challenge. I wanted to create a strong,

functional website for Goldin Ceramics, making it easier for consumers to view her products, contact her directly, and thereby increase sales.

When I asked my aunt if she would let me take on this huge project, she was elated. She knew that she had to redesign her website but she had neither time nor money to make it happen. Her only form of advertising was attending craft shows roughly once a month and few others aside from the attendees ever even got the chance to view her work. Olga burned me a CD of photos, gave me her latest product catalog, a price list, and sent me on my way.

Analysis of Current Website

The importance of an online presence can not be underestimated in today's digital world. As consumers forgo paper catalogs and magazines in favor of online versions and do an increasingly large number of their shopping online, businesses must adapt to keep up with the pace. Since the only way people who don't attend craft shows can view Olga's work is through her website, it is a vital tool for the success of her small business.

That being said, the current Goldin Ceramics (http://www.olgagoldin.com) fails at bringing in any success. The website lacks proper structure, and has a higher likelihood of turning users away from desired behavior (purchase). I understand that it was created by a programmer, not a designer, and the best web sites blend the skills of both disciplines.   The main page contains a large, blurry image with a large, bright blue gradient border. In addition, the menu contains three

bright buttons in clashing colors: dark blue, yellow, and hot pink. The
entire website is also made in javascript which is slow to load and nearly
impossible to navigate (the URL never changes, it stays at
olgagoldin.com).
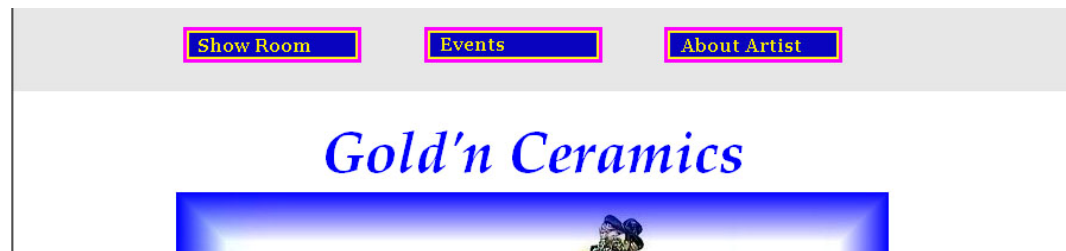
If I accidentally stumbled on this website, I would think it was done
by an amateur with no skills and move on to something more graphically-
pleasing. Honestly, if I didn't know Olga and ended up looking at this
website, it would detract me from purchasing any of her products,
regardless of how pleasing the actual products were. In this era of
internet technology, a good website is essential for business's success. In
the opinions of many, anyone with access to simple website software is
capable of putting together a descent looking site and customers these
days do not tolerate sites that are not attractive. A poorly-designed
website is simply a recipe for disaster.

I knew that I had to completely re-design the website and start from
scratch. Not only was the website itself was not appealing, the images of
her wonderful products were also poorly photographed and lacked the
appeal they conveyed in real life. I knew that I could fix the problem with
some photo-editing skills and new shooting sessions. My initial primary

concern was coming up with a new design that will be graphically pleasing and easy to navigate.

Site Structure

Before diving into website design, I used my Professor Stephen Masiclat's advice and came up with a proper wire-frame structure. On my aunt's current website, her main menu is divided into three categories: Show Room, Events, and About Artist. Clicking on "Show Room" takes the user to a page that contains 9 sub-categories: Mezuzahs, Menorahs, Dreidels, Sabbath, Teapots, Tzedakah Boxes, Wedding, New, and others. Clicking on one of these categories takes the user to a page of thumbnails that open a larger-sized photo in a new window. This structure is difficult to navigate and seems to underestimate the importance of every product and the values that it brings to customers. In addition, I didn't find a link taking me back to the home page anywhere on the website.

When Masiclat saw the product categories on Olga's original website, he elaborated on how much they didn't make sense. In a proper web site architecture, all categories are parallel and a visitor learns what behavior takes him or her to the final destination. He related that there was no parallel structure and having a category titled "new" was completely pointless because it doesn't tell the user what is behind that link. If something came to the web page looking for a particular item, he or she would have to click on numerous categories in order to find what he

or she was looking for. When creating a web page, it is important to make everything as easy to locate as possible.

Olga's current website also contained some categories that were product categories, while some of the other ones were special occasions. There was no logical organizational method in regard to this website and the structural choices just didn't seem to make logical sense. Some images were also found in multiple locations, making it even more difficult for me to figure out the proper solution.

In order to decide how to organize the product information on my new website, I first listed all of the products on the website and in the catalog (sometimes the products did not over-lap). I wanted to find common trends and themes to figure out how to best present the information to visitors of my future site.

Before I got far into the process, I realized that I also needed to learn something about Jewish Ceramics. I had no idea, for example, when a Kiddish Cup was used or what a Tzedakah box was. I went online and did some research in order to find out exactly what pieces went with what special occasion and how I could organize everything in a logical manner.

Originally, I had settled on five categories: Wedding Gifts, Special Occasions, Home Décor, Accessories, and Collectibles with numerous products listed after them. However, after writing down all of the pieces, I decided to eliminate the accessories category and group it under Home

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Décor and Special Occasions. Now that everything was organized, it was time for me to move on to the next stop of the process: the design.

Initial Design

Coming up with a new design for the website was a huge challenge for me. Since I have had very little previous experience in web design, I didn't know exactly where to start and what would make a great web site layout for Goldin Ceramics. Because the current website had no overall theme and my aunt's ceramic work came in such a large variety of styles, and shapes and colors, I had a very difficult time deciding where to start.

I tried to browse through some website that I thought would be similar to what I want to create. I was surprised to find at how few websites for small ceramics businesses were out there! However, with the help of Google, I finally found two that I were rather appealing: http://www.jacarandastyle.com/ and http://www.mackenzie-childs.com/index.aspx. Both of these websites were created for small businesses and displayed ceramic work in a clean, tasteful manner. I knew that I wanted a design and structure similar to these sites, but was having a difficult time coming up with a solution.

One of the graphic pieces of information my aunt gave me was a catalog of her work, created by a graphic designer she hired a few years ago. The catalog used mute beige, pink, and blue colors and featured two large vases with roses on the cover. I think that, somewhat subconsciously, I used that as a basis for my first design:
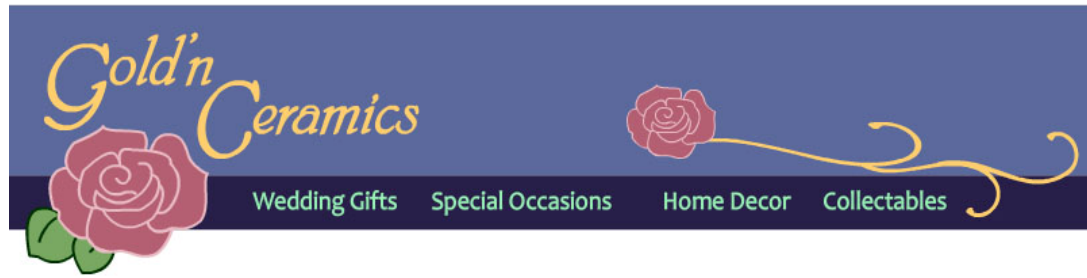
I decided that it was important to highlight the name of her company and maintain the association with the color gold. Since the rose was very prominent on the front page of the catalog, I decided that it would make for a great logo and central image. I placed the rose on the left hand side and displayed my four product categories: Wedding Gifts, Special Occasions, Home Décor, and Collectibles.

To come up with a color scheme, I used Illustrator's helpful color combination tool and based it off of the pink color I picked out of her catalog. The colors seemed to go well together and reflected the colors of some of her pieces.

I decided that the sub-menu would appear below the headers and enlisted the help of Lawrence Royer, my web animation professor, to make the sub-menu functional. The joy I felt after creating a functional web menu in Flash is hard to describe; it was a rather dorky satisfaction I haven't felt since my early middle school years of website-making.

Working with the Client

Even though I've held numerous jobs and internships in the past, working so closely with a client related to me and completing such an intense project on my own, certainly felt challenging. During our first

phone conversation, I briefly related my initial design ideas and asked her for her input in terms of what was and wasn't working on her current website. She mentioned that she did not like the fact that her website came with a paypal feature (of which I wasn't aware of). Since all of her work is done by hand, she rarely has much in stock and doesn't want consumers to think that she is a factory. Olga said that she would much rather have a form people can fill out and submit to her, giving her time to make whatever piece they choose. When I asked her how often people have ordered from her online, she related that she had received only three orders in the past two years.

I also met with my aunt Olga in person during my Spring Break in order to get her reaction on my initial design and to photograph her new pieces. Even though she enjoyed the way I designed the first header, I could tell that she wasn't too thrilled with my color choices. As I look at them now, I do agree that the do not relate to the liveliness of her work. She informed me that the catalog I used for inspiration was, in fact, really outdated and that I should consider changing my design to reflect her most-recent work. (The work that she spoke of came in autumn-colors of gold, orange, and deep green.)

Olga also wasn't too thrilled with the idea of relating to her brand to a rose. Roses made her think of old people while her business was young, lively, and light-hearted. Although Olga said that what I have is

fine, I knew that she wasn't completely happy. In this case, she wasn't my aunt, she was my client. And it was my job to make her happy.

Current Design

After spending an entire weekend editing all of Olga's product photos, I knew for certain that my initial design was not going to work. When I look back at my first layout, it really does make me think of grandma-style porcelain dolls and doilies. Her work is completely opposite in style from that and the last thing I wanted is for her products to compete with the web design. I decided to reflect back to the color choices she specified and played around with colors and lines in Illustrator until I came up with this:

In creating this design, I certainly utilized the "less is more" principle to its fullest extent. Less colors that contrasted with her pieces; more white space. Less frills and curves, more clean space and straight lines. The font I used for the new Goldin Ceramics logo was also more appropriate than my previous font; brighter, livelier, easier to read. Overall, the colors were a vast improvement. The reaction I got from everyone was positive. Some of my friends confessed to me that they

weren't too thrilled with my original design but let it slide because they knew of how much pressure I was under.

After editing all of the photos and seeing what was available, I also changed the product categories once again and just cut it down to three: Special Occasions, Home Décor, and Collectibles. I realized that weddings were just as special of an occasion to Jewish families as Bat Mitzvahs and Hannukahs and therefore did not deserve special attention.

Now that had a functional menu; I focused on figuring out how to display all of the newly-photoshoped images. After giving it much thought, I decided to create interactive image galleries using Flash for all of the cateogries. I used the advertising principle of creating something interactive rather than intrusive to capture audience attention and gain involvement. Instead of having all of the images display at once, a visitor has to select which images to see with his or her mouse. This gives them more of an experience of visiting a art gallery rather than a product site.

I also used the principles of interactivity I learned in my Web Design class by having all of the links change in size and/or color when a mouse goes over them. Having something happen re-enforces the user that a change is about to occur and encouraging them to keep clicking in order to discover more pages.

To solve the problem of paypal but still give users the option to request products online, I created an order form with much room for freedom of expression. A user simply has to decide on the type of product

her or she wants and then has the option of either mentioning which one

they wish to base it on, or to describe what they want from scratch. This

will certainly be a useful tool for Olga to use when she gets new product

orders.

Search Engine Optimization

I learned about Search Engine Optimization (SEO) in my Design

Interactivity class. Stephen Masiclat explained to us that websites with a

lot of text and links are usually found easily by Google whereas those

done completely in Flash are almost impossible to detect. It's very

important for a website to contain related terms physically close to each

other and link up with other websites of similar topics to increase its

search-ability. Google is getting smarter and smarter at distinguishing

useful and useless sites whenever a user searches for an item.

In order to optimize Goldin Ceramic's search-ability, I implemented

a number of tactics. I could have easily created the entire website in

Flash but I chose to use Dreamweaver as my base in order to make it

readable by Google as well as anyone with disabilities who use a

computerized reader to learn what the content is about.

I decided to purchase the URL http://www.goldinceramics.com in

order to make it more memorable to Olga's consumers and ensure that no

one else would be using her name. Since her business is, in fact, named

Goldin Ceramics, it made sense to purchase that URL and re-route the old

URL to it. Additionally, I made sure to title every page and every image so that it came up on Google's search results.

Most importantly, I made sure that I wrote enough copy on every single page that would be located by search engines without a problem. After all, even though the images are important and could probably speak for themselves, the final goal of the website is to drive traffic and increase sales.

Conclusion

Creating an entire website from scratch is probably one of the most challenging intellectual and creative challenges I have been faced with in my career. When I started building the Goldin Ceramics website, I hadn't realized just how many hours it would actually take me to clean up the entire collection of images and make sure everything runs smoothly. Flash is certainly a useful program but every little move requires numerous steps and lines of precise code. The most important factor is that both Olga and I are really happy with the final product and she now has website URL that she won't be embarrassed to put on her business card in bold print.

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