



Websites—The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (updated 6/07)

In January, 2005, I surveyed art buyers (ABs) from advertising agencies across the US about their thoughts when it comes to photographers' websites – what they liked, disliked, and if they thought it was vital for a photographer to have a good website. The results were clear: when asked "How important is it for you, as a photo buyer, for a photographer to have a website where you can see her/his work?" 87% of respondents answered the question "very" or "most important." Not a single respondent said it was "not important."

This importance is perhaps made more evident by the fact that the number of physical portfolios brought in by agencies for review for specific projects has dropped significantly in the very recent past. When asked how many portfolios these ABs used to bring in for a project (before website portfolios), 74% said 6-25 books (with 13% more saying 26-49), depending on the project. Now, the ABs bring in only 0-5 (52%). In almost every case, each individual respondent said that the number had dropped for him/her – for example, if they had brought in 26-49 portfolios for a project, they now only brings in 6-14 or even less.

This means that today art buyers often will select the first cut for any potential project based on website portfolios alone. They may review a large number of online portfolios, but they'll only call in a couple of physical books. In fact, for some projects, no physical portfolios are requested – 50% of the ABs said they have awarded projects based on the website portfolio review (that is, without seeing the physical book). No website? Bad website? No chance.

Basic quality standards

However, just having a website – of any quality – is not enough. Your site needs to be of a certain quality to hold the interest of most worthwhile potential clients. As in all parts of your marketing mix, there are some basic standards to keep in mind when it comes to your site – things like your branding, good, clean design, and ease-of-use. There are a rather surprising number of photographers' websites out there that are an affront to the eye, the ear, or are so complicated or poorly designed that they may as well have no site at all. I see them every day. And ABs see them too, and loathe them.

When asked "what's the worst thing a photographer can do with his/her website?" many ABs mentioned things like broken links, bad programming (crash an AB's computer, and you'll be remembered and blacklisted), forcing users to log in, copyright agreements that need to be clicked, and just making them click too many times before they can even see the work. If an AB has to click more than three times before getting to the actual images, you've got too much in the way. These people are extremely busy and they want to get to the "goods" fast and easily.

So, first "rule": unless you have a background in design and enough technical knowledge to program it well, you should hire a professional to do your site. The initial design and programming should be done by someone who specializes in this sort of work – you are a photographer, not a designer and not a programmer. Photographers have a tendency to try and do everything themselves – this is not one of the places where that is a good thing. Hire a pro and get it done right.

That being said, I suggest working with your designer with this goal in mind – to create a clean, simple site that loads quickly, shows your work well, and that you can easily maintain and update. The ability to self-update your site is important and you should really learn what you need to know to do that. That way there is no easy excuse for not keeping it current.

So what works? And what doesn't?

I've reviewed more websites than I could probably count. Between that experience and my talks with ABs and other creative services buyers, what works and what doesn't becomes pretty clear. If you already have a website, this information should help you re-evaluate its effectiveness. If you don't have one, you can start off on the right foot.

Generally speaking, forget about the fancy Flash animated intro. These are particularly disliked, as evidenced by the survey ABs responses: 17% said they "always hate them" and 70% said they "bother them but it's not too bad as long as there is a 'skip' button." When 87% of your target market is at some level bugged by a part of your marketing, dump it.

I used to advocate against using Flash at all, but in the past couple of months, that has changed. Clients have caught up with technology more and more, so a good Flash-based site can be a great tool. Livebooks.com has some great solutions that are very popular with clients and well worth the cost, for example.

Music is also not a great idea unless there is an obvious "off" button. The ABs in the survey agree, with 22% saying music is "always annoying" and 39% saying it's "annoying but okay as long as there is an 'off' button." Remember, many of these people work in open cubicle environments so sound can be a problem in the workplace. Also, you may love Snoop Dogg but your potential client may hate rap music – why run the risk of offending? I've seen more than one person click off a site in disgust because of the music.

On a similar vein, the "amusing" noises like shutter sounds on mouse clicks should be reconsidered. 70% of the ABs said they might be cute the first time they visit a site, maybe, but after that they're just annoying. Besides, just how original do you think it is to use a shutter sound in the first place?

The best sites are often very simple. Remember, you are not selling design or music or websites, you are selling imagery – representations of your vision. If the images aren't easy to see or are overshadowed by the site design, you're shooting yourself in the foot. When asked to list some of their favorite sites (based on the quality of the site, not the images), the ABs in the survey mentioned mostly simple ones like those3reps.com and craigcutler.com. Clean, easy to use, and the images are right there for the viewing – it's no wonder they're liked.

When it comes to navigation, the most popular and effective sites are user-directed; that is, the navigation is controlled by the user, not forced by the site. "Slideshows," where the order and the timing are uncontrollable by the user, are the least effective and most disliked (70% of the ABs ranks this method last in preference). Thumbnails or at least smaller images that a user can click on to see a larger version are very popular. However, the best option is to have static, unmoving "next" and "previous" buttons so that the user doesn't even have to move her/his cursor. Whatever you select, "keep it simple" is a good mantra for navigation questions. You want your targets to see your work, after all.

The categories for the images, if you choose to categorize, can present some problems. I used to advocate picking good section names but I'm afraid that advice was often misinterpreted. What I now suggest is avoiding using categories at all but if you must, make them as broad as possible. Why? Because our brains work with words in such a way as to make presuppositions and, when something violates what we have presupposed, it gets a negative reaction. For example, if you have a category "portraits" and you have a fantastic image of a horse's face in it, there is a high chance that viewers will not see that as a "portrait" and then not like the image—even if it's fantastic.

Which images to show

Your potential clients are all creatives or at least people who are so intimately involved in the creative industries that they can and will see past all the bells and whistles to the quality of your work. You can't hide bad work with a fantastic site. As the old saying goes, you can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig. So, if your site is complicated and your work isn't strong enough, well, you're simply alienating potential clients. At the same time, if you have a good, clean, easy to navigate site, your work had better be strong because it will definitely be the centre of attention on the site.

Thus, your work should be first and foremost – it needs to be your best work, it needs to show your vision, and it needs to be consistent with all your other marketing pieces. Remember, this is your online portfolio. If you wouldn't put the work in your physical book, why are you putting it online? Issues of sequencing may become more fluid because of the nature of a website, but image selection should still be clearly the work which best shows your vision.

As for how many images to show, there is a greater variation on the web than in physical books (where I like to keep it below 25 pages). Still, you don't need to show everything you've ever done. It is much better to have fewer yet very strong images than many "good enough" images. If you feel like you don't have enough images that are powerful enough to show, you need to shoot more.

As a website is a part of your entire marketing mix, it is important for it to match your other marketing materials. Most importantly, the images on your site should reflect the same vision as the images in your physical book. One of the worst things you can do is have your book called in by a potential client because of what they saw on your site, and then send a book that is totally different. Art buyers complain about that all the time, and it's the kiss of death for a future relationship with any AB. I like some overlap in the images seen on the website and in the physical book, but with some "new" images for the AB to see as well. Regardless, just make sure they match.

Contact info, please!

The most important thing to keep in mind is always: make it easy for your target market to use you. That means besides making it simple for your potential clients to see your work, you need to make sure it is easy for them to contact you. I have seen a surprising number of websites that don't have basic contact info on them.

You must have, easily available (preferably on each page), the following: your name, your email address (with a clickable link), and your phone number. Including your street address is not a bad idea either. At the bare minimum, you should have a separate page with your full contact information, including your complete street address and any other potential contact

points – and a link to that page on every page. Besides just being easy to contact, providing full information has an additional benefit: people often do searches based on location so if you have your location on your site, they will be able to find you.

Other bits and pieces

I personally like sites with a biography page of some sort. It humanizes you. Sometimes information in your bio will “connect” with a potential client and they’ll give you a shot where they might not otherwise. Don’t make it too long, though, and keep it related to your professional life. It may be fine to write “Bob Smith lives in Del Mar, California with his wife and two kids” but don’t go on to say “Bob’s wife, Samantha, is a real estate professional who knits in her spare time” or “Bob likes to golf with his eldest son on the weekends and watch his daughter play soccer.” Remember, potential clients are busy people and you don’t want to waste their time.

Of course, if you shoot golf products, then mention playing it (even with your son) because that shows your passion for your subject, but otherwise, skip the family shout-outs (and that includes family photos).

You can list some of your clients in your biography or have a separate client list. I tend to prefer the latter, and in simple list format. Again, you don’t need to include every single client you’ve ever worked with, but do make sure to list the ones with good name recognition. Clients often ask me if they should list agencies or end-clients on their lists. I think you should list both.

Some potential clients will be impressed you worked with Nike while others will be more impressed you did that work for Wieden + Kennedy. And don’t skimp on the publication titles if you’ve done editorial work. People are impressed that you’ve shot for *Business Week* or *Hemispheres*.

Speaking of writing, as a photographer’s website is obviously a mostly visual thing, sometimes the words get short shrift. While a site shouldn’t get too wordy (less IS more), the words that are on the site need to be grammatically correct, spelled correctly, and the writing should be good. As most photographers are visually oriented, I suggest hiring a good copywriter. At the very least, hire a good proofreader. Language errors can make a surprising difference to potential clients. Misspellings and grammar faults make you look unprofessional. A copywriter or a proofreader won’t cost you very much, but they can make a big difference in your results.

A “bonus” marketing opportunity

As I mentioned earlier, you want to keep your website updated. This is important not only because it should be constantly and consistently reflective of your current vision, updating the website also provides you with additional marketing opportunities. Each time you update your site, you should contact your clients and potential clients – to let them know it’s been updated. Whether you do this via a postcard or an email promo, it’s another point of contact that will help keep your name in their heads. You can also send out press releases announcing the “new website” or “new material” or “new images available for viewing.” Thus, you can get at least one more point-of-contact with your targets that you may not have had, simply by doing an update. As Martha Stewart has been known to say, “That’s a very good thing.”