

Benefits of Web Page Screenshots as Design Elements

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Overview

Anyone with a web presence has many factors to consider when it comes to website design. Visual elements are always a big consideration, and for many businesses, the relevance of the images is often dependent on how current they are.

If you remember only one thing, remember this:

Web pages and search results that include properly used images are more effective, save time, and increase targeted site visitors.



Not Just Traffic. Targeted Traffic!

Many people are familiar with the Keep It Simple, Stupid (K.I.S.S.) concept.

James Carville, a political strategist and advisor to former President Bill Clinton, was famous for constantly reminding the Clinton campaign staffers that the key issue Mr. Clinton was focused on was, "The economy, stupid!"

This statement was Carville's way of reminding them of the K.I.S.S. concept and how it applied to Clinton's political campaign. Just as political campaigns have many success factors, so does website design. Carville understood the value of focus, and when it comes to websites, "It's targeted traffic, stupid," is a great phrase to help remind yourself to stay focused on directing targeted traffic.

Being found by the right customers is the name of the game, not just driving large numbers of uninterested visitors to a website. By properly using website preview thumbnails, webmasters can direct the right traffic, not just any traffic, to affiliates and partners; and that is smart business.

It is all About Image

The phrase “Image is everything” holds as much truth in web and application design, as it does with anything else. People are drawn to attractive things. It is for this very reason that companies spend significant amounts of time and money: to make their products stylish, designing fancy logos, and hiring attractive people to pitch their product or service. They also do this because research shows that having a good image pays off.

In a series of US studies researchers investigated how a candidate’s appearance and pictures of a candidate affects a person’s selection. In one case, the researchers had subjects cast imaginary ballots based only on the candidates’ pictures. What the researchers found is that the test subjects had very specific ideas of what a winning candidate looked like. Once they identified the “winning” characteristics, the researchers were able to correctly predict the winner in 68% - 75% of the elections that were studied.¹ The authors concluded that, “These are very large effects,” and the implications of how a person seeing what they are looking for affects their selection process is a big deal.

So whether a user is glancing through a list of favorite websites, trying to select the best option from a list of sites within a directory or just trying to decide if the next click in an on-going search for information is worth their time; It is clear that being able to see what is on the other side of a link allows an individual to decide if the link is a “winner.” This selection process is a natural human reflex and reinforces the benefit of providing screenshots as visual aids.

Not only will users be able to quickly judge if a site is attractive enough to visit, designers, through strategic placement and bit of know-how, can improve the overall image of their own sites or application as well. In the “dog eat dog world” of the web, any competitive edge is an advantage.

Sources:

¹ “Looking like a Winner: Candidate Appearance and Electoral Success in New Democracies”, World Politics / Volume 62 / Issue 04 / October 2010, pp 561-593 2010, Chappell Lawsona, Gabriel S. Lenza, and Michael Myers of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Andy Bakera of University of Colorado at Boulder. <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=7909925>

It's How You Use It

The use of images and web page screenshots within websites is nothing new. What is new, is how easily screenshots can now be integrated into websites and applications. What once was a tedious, drawn out process of manually using the print screen function, saving, editing, uploading, and laying out a web page screenshot, has been automated.

A task that used to take hours can now be done in seconds. Now that a machine is doing the heavy lifting at lightning speeds, screenshots are being used in ways never before envisioned.

Incorporating automated web page previews into a website or application can, reduce design time, prevent misdirection and link errors, improve efficiency, and enhance overall user experience.

Web page screenshots uses are limited only by the creativity of the designer and the perceived benefits to the end user.

Save Time & Be More Efficient

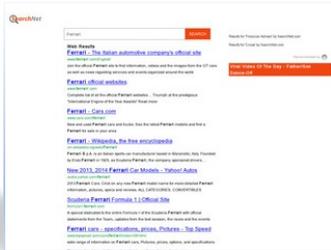
Many of the features of thumbnail previews boils down to the benefit of saving time. Virtually every computer application on the market today makes liberal use of icons and other visual imagery, to make the user experience better.

Research conducted by the Department of Computer Science and Information Systems at the University of Jyväskylä Finland, showed that the presence of icons had a significant positive effect on study subject's scanning speed when they looked for a target file among files used merely as distractions.² The use of icons in applications borrows from the same visual image research and principles.

The concepts that have led to increased use of icons in user interfaces also applies to thumbnail previews, as they are a form of an icon representing the web page being previewed. When the ability to automatically update a preview is available, another time-saving element is added. The time that developers and/or webmasters would have spent manually updating their screenshots is saved in the automation process and keeping web page previews current, maintains the contextual relevance between the "icon" and the web page itself.

² Visual search for grouped versus ungrouped icons in a computer interface. Niemelä M, Saarinen J. Human Factors. 2000 Winter;42(4):630-5.

Improve Web Page Listing Relevance



www.ferarri.com

vs.



www.ferrari.com

In a search for Ferrari's website, it is easy to follow a link that misspells the site name and end up at the wrong site on the left. The screenshot adds additional context to the text link, further reinforcing that the correct choice is being made.

Deciding which of these websites is more relevant to your search, becomes obvious when shown a visual comparison. In addition, it is easy to see that with the absence of the screenshots, the slight difference between the text links may not be so clear.

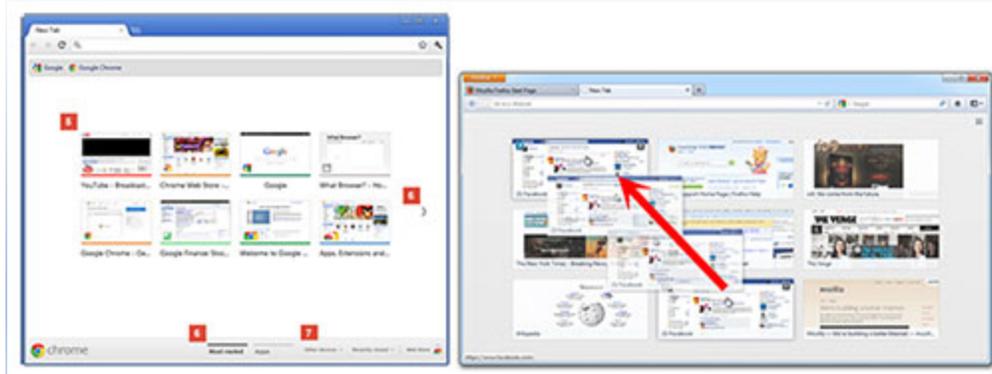
Microsoft conducted a study that compared websites that used text only links to websites that used a combination of text and thumbnails. They found the sites using a combination of text and thumbnails dramatically outperformed other websites, in terms of the user finding websites that were most relevant to them³.

Recall Previously Visited Websites

Most people readily recognize web pages they have already seen, and by glancing at a thumbnail preview, can quickly assess whether they want to visit that page again or try a different page. Whether they are trying to avoid a page or find a page, this feature gives a user the benefit of quick visual reference. Popular web browsers, Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox both use website screenshots for this very reason. (Google Support, 2013) (Mozilla Support)

References:

³ Do Thumbnail Previews Help Users Make Better Relevance Decisions about Web Search Results?, by Susan Dziadosz and Raman Chandrasekar, 2002



A Highly Effective Development and End User Tool

As seen throughout this paper, something as simple as a web page screenshot becomes a powerful tool once a practical purpose is recognized and met. Many companies, like Google and Mozilla, have provided its end users with practical, interactive tools based on screenshots.

Beyond the mainstream uses of web page screenshots, there still is an untapped market. Once developers begin to think along the lines of what a user might be able to do with the ability to manipulate the images of web pages, a trend of filling the visual and functional gap within websites and applications will begin.

Something as difficult to sort through as a browser favorites list, can be transformed into a photo album or “cover art”-style gallery that allows end users to quickly scan through pictures of their favorite web pages. While it is true that automated screenshots are being used to make more powerful organizational, reference, and design tools; there are also applications of using screenshots for entertainment purposes.

With so much competition on in the internet, much time and money is spent to gain recognition. The desire for exposure creates the opportunity for design and for marketing firms to use entertainment to get a customer’s attention. With the automation of website screenshot, what once was a static data source can now be used as a multi-dimensional animated object.

Anyone up for a game of “Web Page Ninja?”

About ShrinkTheWeb®

ShrinkTheWeb® offers a service to fully automate the capture and delivery of web page screenshots. The company was founded in 2009 and has been a driving force in the emerging automated website screenshot marketplace. ShrinkTheWeb has always held fast to the idea that website screenshots will eventually become a staple of the Internet. They will become a commonplace replacement or enhancement to simply showing a link. They are the natural evolution to linking and referencing on the web.