INTERACT

SOUTHWEST WEB SITES FOCUS ON THE END USER

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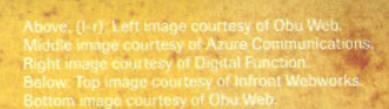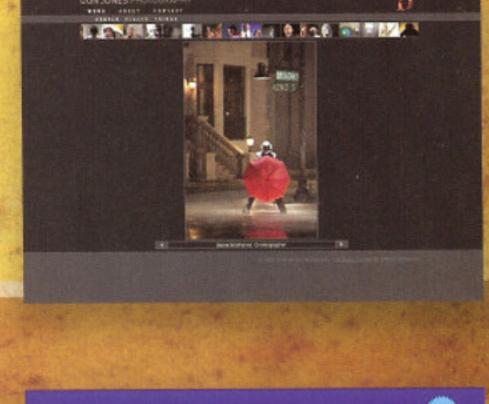
Speed and simplicity. Those are the driving forces behind today's Web environment. Information is moving faster than ever before due to advances in technology and the increased surfing savvy of the public. When you only have a few moments to catch and retain a consumer's precious attention to tell your story, Web site designers and programmers are under a constant challenge to create compelling, entertaining and easy-to-navigate sites.

Web design firms across the Southwest are staying on top of this challenge by taking advantage of opportunities offered by the open source community and XML. XML, Extensible Markup Language, provides a common framework for programs and databases to talk to each other and supports a wide variety of applications, including interactive experiences for the end user.

What does this mean for the online environment? It means more choices in the design, development and interactivity of Web sites. Information is dynamic, rather than static, and pages can respond and update immediately with user-driven direction. Ajax, Asynchronous JavaScript and XML, is a development technique crucial to the creation of interactive Web development. Blogs, shopping carts, Flash and video all involve interactive technologies and immediacy. While some of these programs, like Flash, have been around for a while, Ajax has allowed for new and advanced uses of old technologies.

The interactive nature of the Web environment is not only a great benefit to the end user, but to designers and programmers as well. With this availability of more choices, comes a stronger need for strategy and direction. Web design firms will often

play the role of strategy adviser and marketer as design and maintenance elements become accessible to the client.

Joshua Strebel of Obū Web Technologies in Scottsdale, likens the current environment to that of a '60s commune of idea sharing. "When everyone agreed to speak the same language, information started moving around rapidly," Strebel says. "It put more power in the hands of the clients when we could offer them high quality and results at a lower price point. Blog technology has become mainstream, the Web is more systemized and production time is compressed."

Obū Web offers a Web design product ideal for micro and small businesses called Flare9.com. This template allows individuals or businesses to build their own professional looking Web sites, complete with content management tools, blogs and e-mail. It may not seem like a novel idea, but the outcomes today are far above what was available before.

"There isn't as much hand-holding, and the clients can edit their content immediately, without calling us and waiting for our programmers to make changes," Strebel says. "We still do client consulting and designing, but interactive technology has become so systematized that speed and flexibility are available to those with smaller budgets."

While having the tools available for self-design is great for many, the need for Web support is not going away anytime soon. The speed of information sharing is not only great for the consumer, but also for the design professionals.

"It's hard to stay on top of all the latest programs and features," says Algie Powers of Salt Lake City. Her firm, Acme Web Designers, caters to small local firms that want to upgrade their sites. "I work to find the right product for my clients, even if it's a program I've never used before," she says. "You can't be afraid to learn and to teach yourself. You can solve things by looking through forums, blogs, message boards, and then trial and error. Even when you started without much knowledge, you feel like you can become an expert."

The interactive nature of the Web is a boon to Powers and others who scour the Internet for the latest developments in technology. She has provided her clients with services like online video of a band's performance or setting up shopping carts.

"I had never put in a video before and not too long ago, it would have been a costly and major effort," Powers says. "I put it into Flash, which is always a good tool to have in your toolbox. Videos are everywhere now and as people get more used to YouTube, they will show up in more places."

Searching out low-cost technology solutions is also key to Susan Chapman's success at Azure Communications in Albuquerque. She laughs and admits that New Mexico tends to be slowly adapting to online trends compared to other regions, but she wants to provide her clients with the most effective technologies to reach their goals. Her client base is small business and nonprofits, so finding affordable solutions to meet their needs is a creative exercise.

One client, the Greater Albuquerque Housing Partnership, works to provide affordable housing in older neighborhoods. The Partnership asked Chapman to help show people what it is doing, promote its successes and stay abreast of its progress of rehabilitating older homes.

"I found a firm that sells their 360-virtual tour service to the real estate industry," says Chapman. "They gave me a nonprofit rate, I hired a local photographer and it was extremely reasonable — compared to trying to reinvent the wheel on my own. Now clients and supporters can go online and do virtual walk-throughs."

Andrea Decker of Element Fusion in Oklahoma City says one key of the firm's success is to keep sites simple. Her firm creates and markets various levels of Web

Image courtesy of Azure Communications

Image courtesy of Digital Function

Image courtesy of Acme Web Designers
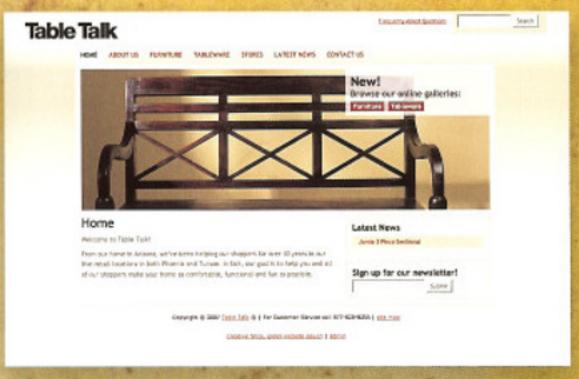

Image courtesy of Element Fusion

(Joshua Strebel)

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design and management products, allowing for client customization and optimal search engine placements.

"We are big admirers of 37signals.com and agree with them in the goal of creating software that is not bloated," Decker says. "Bloating happens when so many bells and whistles are added to an application that it becomes overwhelming for the end user to get full use of it."

One user of Element Fusion's expertise is LifeChurch.tv, an 11-location church across the U.S. The church uses satellite broadcasts, podcasts, videos, blogging and live chats to keep its 20,000 member congregation connected. The church also uses surveys and forms to gather instant feedback from its members.

Also putting the power into the end user's hands is Infront Webworks in Colorado Springs. Andy Meng and his team designed a Web site for Brown Box Music, which allows bands the opportunity to produce CDs — artwork, labels, music — using Flash technology.

"Bands can go online, create artwork that goes straight to the printer and also get a UPC code unique to their CD," Meng says. "We took a cumbersome process of producing CDs for these small acts and put it on the Web. They can get retail-ready CDs in a fast turn around time,

eliminating the time it took to go through the traditional pre-press steps."

Meng says that while Flash has been around for years, the latest evolution has allowed it to talk directly to databases and user interfaces. In addition to the Brown Box Music applications, Infront is also using Flash to help clients create print-ready materials for direct mail campaigns.

Digital Function of Houston is charging ahead with technologies that have opened up with more functionality and possibilities as broadband becomes less limiting. Principals Jeff Stark, Chris Glenn and Marketing Manager Chris Pitre tout their new software, Kalibrate, a complete Web site management solution (WMS) that simplifies content management for the client at a lower cost than previously existing products.

"Kalibrate is Web 2.0 friendly and can adapt to and be configured for hip designs, social collaboration and rich multimedia," Pitre says. "Kalibrate can adapt to any business model and branding — it can adjust to what the client wants to do."

The software is being used in industries as divergent as real estate to high-end candle catalogs. It works in the user-driven environment

through dynamic features in navigation and accessing database content. For example, the complexity of the candle catalog is not something the end user can see or is negatively affected by long download and/or refreshing times.

"It demonstrates that technology and design that are cohesive and complementary can benefit all parties involved: the designer, the customer/end user, and the client," Pitre says. "Overall, Kalibrate gives a rich user experience that surpasses content management, yet provides the same ease of use for site administrators."

Tim Bowen of Creative Slice in Tucson, is adding another element to the interactive technology wave. Creative Slice is a green design and marketing firm specializing in eco-friendly Web site design, blog design, podcasting and Internet marketing.

"The computer lends itself to sustainability because it cuts down on paperwork," Bowen says. "We are working with companies who want to improve their environmental practices and be as eco-friendly as possible."

This effort does not come with a sacrifice to design and functionality. Clients such as the Community Food Bank boast sleek and easy-to-navigate Web sites. Creative Slice provides the latest in tools to clients for connecting to their consumers through blogs, podcasts and videocasts. Seven Cups Tea, a client in Tucson, is using video podcasts to tell the story of tea and its shop in a friendly and informative way. The site also encourages viewers to browse and shop online.

Whether viewers throughout the Internet are browsing for shopping, entertainment, or education, they have more control over their online experience than ever before. The Web designers, developers and programmers are challenged to continue enhancing those experiences in order to drive the desired behaviors.

Fortunately for them, they can meet that challenge with an ever-widening field of interactive tools in their arsenal. By taking full advantage of the opportunities afforded by advances in broadband, open source and XML, the designers — and end users — of Web sites will be limited only by their imagination. ∎

Top right image courtesy of Creative Slice. Bottom right image courtesy of Acme Web Designers.

[author] **Amy Heisler** writes from her home in Tempe, AZ when she is not traveling the world or exploring neighborhood haunts. She has nine years of corporate communications experience and enjoys freelance writing as a way to stay fresh and current. Always seeking out new and life-expanding experiences, Heisler feels as comfortable writing about aerospace or art history as she does about ghost towns and farm living. She has a bachelor of arts in communications from Michigan State University, speaks German and lives every day to its fullest. She is active in the Phoenix community doing volunteer work, supporting the arts and playing the sax in a concert band. Contact her at *aheisler@cox.net*.

[designer] **Joel A. Messner** has always taken some sort of strange pride in the fact that his initials spell "jam." From a young age he would refuse to settle for jelly or the unspeakable marmalade and the less than excellent quality, texture and appearance they brought to the table. This same distaste for anything less than pure "jam" goodness has followed him through life and into his work. He takes pride in the work that he does and strives to put forth every effort to uphold the value and excellence that is jam. For a taste test, visit *notjelly.com*.