The Value of Good Design

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Drawar (web design community) has published a couple of interesting posts about the importance of design and aesthetics for online businesses. The main premise is this: businesses succeed and fail on the web regardless of how well designed their sites are. **An ugly website will succeed if their product or service is good, so why bother making something beautiful?**

Now, the position on this is **that you should care, and that pushing out something that's just good enough isn't what web designers should strive for. I agree. I also think that good design, and good aesthetics for that matter, oftentimes make business sense.**

It's not difficult to find examples of businesses with beautiful websites but no traffic. Businesses with stunning websites that fail because the product or service they're providing just isn't good enough. Design only goes so far, and ultimately cannot save a business if the product just doesn't cut it.

Of course on the other end we have pig ugly websites that are wildly successful. Websites like Craigslist. People point at them and say: "Look, aesthetics don't matter – as long as its usable enough and offers enough value it will succeed". Yes, unless the interface is so unusable that people can't use the service then it probably will succeed – but that's not the point. **The real point is: does good design and good aesthetic help your business be even more successful, and if so, are the gains enough to justify the work spent?**

This will vary depending on your product or service, but in many cases it can and will make a difference. Let's look at some examples where good design generates business (NOTE: Yes, I keep using the word "design". I know it's a loaded term and can mean a great many things, here I'm using it in a broad sense that probably means what you think it means – i.e. user interface architecture, usability and looks – so how it works and looks, not just how it works/looks).

The easiest example is of course Apple. Answer this honestly: do you really think Apple would sell as many Macs if OS X looked ugly and their hardware was made out of chunky, cheap plastic boxes? The difference between Apple and the other computer manufacturers is that Apple really competes on design. They know that everything else is commoditized. Hardware is cheap and there are plenty of choices, so everyone else competes on price. What's worse for other manufacturers is that they also run an off-the-shelf operating system. **So they and all their competitors are churning out the same products, and the only way to win is to make it cheaper. This is a game with many losers.**

When your product is commoditized, you have to change the rules of the game. Unless you can really compete on price you better find another way to differentiate yourself. That other way is design.

I don't think this design advantage somehow only applies to hardware. It doesn't. It works just as well for software and websites. A lot of websites aren't just "tools" – they're destinations. **And even if they were just tools, people still like and will prefer beautiful tools as Apple have shown.**

Take the case of Facebook. Facebook wasn't always the top social network – that place belonged to MySpace. What happened? I believe the reason for Facebook's growth lies in large part to its design. If you compare the two sites, it's pretty obvious which one has a better design. Not just the way it works or the way it looks – both of these things are much better on Facebook's side. It has been like this from the start.

MySpace offered its users a way to personalize their pages. The result: an incoherent mess. Facebook had a clean, minimalist design from the very beginning. It oozes order. Facebook is clarity and order to MySpace's chaos, and I think a whole lot of people prefer this. This doesn't mean MySpace somehow fails – it just means Facebook are **utilizing good design as a competitive edge**.

Look at social news sites: Digg vs Reddit. Both have very similar functionality, but Digg is the more popular one. Which one do you think looks better? Of course "looks" are subjective, but I think this is another case where it's clear where the priorities of each site's developers lie. Digg always had a focus on user interface, design and usability. It looks good, there have always been a coherent design and branding from the start and it's pretty usable. Reddit doesn't fail at usability. It's easy to use and it's feature complete. **What it lacks is a good aesthetic.**

Looks have never been a priority for the Reddit developers because they never stopped people using the site. Nevertheless, the ugly design means that traffic will be lost to Digg because new visitors who find out about both sites will have to judge where they want to stay, and given similar functionality and content they'll go for the better looking site. **They'll go for the better looking site because that's all they can see, and so that's what they use to make the call.**

If your product creates a new market, then design probably won't matter as much. The product is providing a unique value to your customers and there is nobody else these customers can turn to. Whenever there is competition though, especially competition offering a product with the same feature set as yours, design becomes important. Design becomes a means of differentiation. Either differentiate yourself on your product – introduce some new feature or service that your competitor lacks – or differentiate yourself on design.

Good design speaks. Good design tells your visitors that you care about your product. Good design at the front-end suggests that everything is in order at the back-end, whether or not that is the case. Good design is what separates the best from the "good-enough".

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