

Book review: Defensive Design for the Web¹

by Branko Collin (May 12, 2004)

Introduction

Defensive Design for the Web deals with preventing common interface design mistakes on e-commerce websites. It shows real world examples of websites getting it wrong and other websites getting it right. By presenting these examples side by side, the reader immediately gets to see why something works (or why it does not).

More precisely, this is a book about what's called *contingency design*, planning for how to deal with things that may go wrong. It covers the sort of problems you can encounter when selling goods or services through a web site using an on-line ordering mechanism. You will learn how to avoid and reduce problems regarding:

- Error messages
- Writing
- Forms
- Missing files on the server
- Help sections
- Search engines
- Unavailable products

Details

Title:
Defensive Design
for the Web

Author(s):
37signals (for this
book: Matthew
Linderman,
Jason Fried)

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www.37signals.com/book/



¹ Originally published at <http://evolt.org/node/60317/>

Example

Here's one of the Head to Head comparisons of the book². It demonstrates how a designer should plan for the contingency that a search for a product generates more results than a shopper can deal with at once. The example product that is searched for are "basketball shoes":



37signals writes: Finish Line gives me the option to filter the results by brand, price, or size.



37signals writes: Footlocker [...] doesn't provide a way to filter the results. [...] would any customer really be willing to click through 17 pages to see all these shoes? It's doubtful.

After a short introductory text about contingency design, the book immediately starts exploring forty contingencies, offering several examples and a solution for each. The last chapter of this book is a contingency check list, allowing you to easily check websites for problems that might only pop-up during actual use.

Audience

Many of us have suffered the frustration of a client wanting some feature that would hopelessly diminish the value and usability of the site; or of a client striking a feature that would have increased that value or usability. Because of the accessible tone and form of this book, it can finally be the

² http://37signals.com/images/dd_look_in_H2H.gif

voice of reason you were looking for in the discussion with your clients. In some instances (far too few, unfortunately), the authors even point out how planning for a contingency increased a website's revenue by dozens of percent. These are the sort of arguments that could convince your customers: show them this book.

Although on the whole a perfectly valuable book, it contains many small, grating errors. For instance, ALT attributes are called ALT tags, and the authors recommend that you print alerts in 'bold red' type, even though that may lead to unreadable text depending on the background colour and pattern of the alert text. Web developers with any experience will recognize these cosmetic imperfections for what they are, but for the uninitiated they may seem like commandments coming down from the mountain. As such, I would recommend this book only to somewhat experienced web and interface designers and developers, who are already aware of usability and accessibility issues.

Conclusion

Murphy's law often gets misquoted as: whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. What Murphy really said is that even if you plan for all contingencies, still some problem will crop up that you did not consider. Be that as it may, this book helps you to at least plan for some of the contingencies that you *can* plan for.

Chicago's 37signals have stumbled on a refreshing form of writing about web usability. Instead of standing high up on the mountain, carrying three clay tablets and shouting down their abstract rules at the people, their simple guidelines are supported by a large number of real world examples and counter-examples. By showing the mistakes that some of the major companies from the US make, and how similar companies get it right, they have made web usability accessible.

This format may have a bright future. The authors zoomed in on the sort of contingencies troubling e-commerce websites. There may be room for similar books on more generic usability problems. Until then, *Defensive Design for the Web* deserves to be read by web designers who take their craft seriously.

The companion website³ serves purely the promotion of the book. It sports quotes from a lot of reviews, and previews of a number of pages. **These previews capture the bulk of the book**, so if you want to find out if you need this book, I would suggest you check these out.

³ <http://www.37signals.com/book/>