



How Flash Is Costing You Money and Hurting Your Internet Marketing Strategy



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Macromedia (now Adobe) Flash is ubiquitous on the Internet. Adobe is proud of saying 97% of all browsers are Flash enabled which means that any Flash objects on your site will be displayed to almost any visitor on your site. The web development community not wanting to be a slouch has created entire sites based in Flash and has created thousands of extra Flash pieces for sites including banners, navigation, web site headers, advertisements and host of other Flash elements for sites and so the dark era of Flash has begun.

Could vs. Should

In the movie Jurassic Park the mathematician says to his fellow scientists at one point... "You were so concerned if you COULD do it that you never stopped to ask if SHOULD do it." Of course his meaning is that his fellow scientists were more interested in breaking the current boundaries of science and not paying attention to the consequences of those decisions. Today we have the same thing happening; nobody seems to be asking the question is their Flash good for the bottom line. It seems as with most new technology people are more concerned with the fact that they can do it and trying to figure out how far you can push the technology. What new frontiers can you cross with it, science is always so noble.

Since so many web users can see Flash and so many developers are implementing it now there are Flash based web sites all over. Fortune 500 companies to small business seem to be totally enamored with Flash. It is becoming so popular that people are starting to request that their developers create something in Flash just so they have it. Businesses believe that without this new "cutting edge" technology their site will be considered old and outdated.

I don't believe this movement towards ever present Flash and now entire sites built out of Flash is a good thing. In fact, it can be one of the worst things you can do for your web site strategy. I know this is blasphemous in a world where 97% of all web users can see this cool stuff and appreciate the true interactive nature on the web instead of plain old boring static pages!

The Arguments for Flash

Some of the arguments for Flash are that there are way too many static type advertising mediums from direct mail, bill boards, to magazine ads that are largely ignored. With so many ads never getting attention doesn't it make sense to create attention grabbing Flash ads or get someone's attention with Flash?

Web developers will also talk about how Flash creates interactivity on the web and creates a more enjoyable user experience. Developers and marketers alike argue that the web has so much potential with sound, color, movement, video, and interaction that not using Flash to unlock some of this potential is a lost opportunity.

Many developers also argue that Flash is a very “light weight” application, which simply means that Flash elements and applications download very quickly and therefore are good for both dial up as well as broad band users. It doesn’t matter if your Flash element is a video, advertisement, or application it downloads quickly and offers rich web based applications to almost all users. Developers believe Flash will help move the Internet into the next phase of evolution. How noble.

Aesthetics and Technology Over Results

While it is true, Flash loads fast, works in almost every browser, and creates interactive displays where previously none existed; I believe it has many harmful things it can do to both your web site and more importantly your marketing strategy.

I have argued for years that a web site is not an exercise in cutting edge, or as a past CEO I worked with said, bleeding edge, technology. Web sites are also not meant to be a display of artistic accomplishment or technological prowess. It is a sales and marketing vehicle designed to communicate a message. It is about profit.

Web sites just like TV commercials, direct mail, radio, display ads, and many other vehicles is a marketing and sales vehicle, period. I know right now someone is hallowing that TV is interactive, i.e. it moves has sounds etc. and radio to some degree is as well, but consider the medium. In television you are sitting passively watching something and the commercial is introduced. It is the same with many of the other forms of advertising I mentioned as well.

The key point is that regardless of how the medium is used or how the ad is introduced it should be tied to a specific result. The ad should be designed to elicit a response from the person exposed to it. Mass media advertising has had this problem for sometime with Creative Directors and Ad agencies questing over silly awards given to each other for the most creative or artistic commercial or ad piece without thought as to its actual effect on the bottom line.

New Rules – The Internet Revolution

Along comes the Internet and starts messing this whole advertising thing up. People start choosing the Internet over other forms of entertainment. It actually begins to replace other mediums in the limited time we have available to us. So now advertisers are not only competing for your attention while you are using the medium they have chosen to advertise on, but now they are battling to get you to even choose that medium in the first place.

Along comes Madison Avenue and using their same tried and true models from the last 100+ years they start covering the web with advertising... passive advertising. In almost every form of mass media advertising from TV, radio, bill boards, print ads, etc. they are passive in nature. In other words the ads are introduced to an audience that may or may not be paying attention. However this model has seemed to work for businesses and Madison Avenue for a while, so why not stick with a good thing. They figure if you are going to be using the web like you do TV then slapping ads all over it should do the trick.

Once Flash comes along Madison Avenue thinks they have died and gone to ad heaven. Now instead of that boring old static text and pictures they can create beautiful display ads to grab your attention and they can do it a fraction of the cost of TV! Unfortunately they didn't really spend anytime considering the difference between their mediums for ads and the Internet. The audience that uses the Internet operates under a different set of rules and has certain cultural feelings about aspects of the Internet and how it should be used. Unfortunately Madison Avenue has missed this train as well.

Push vs. Pull

Consider the difference in the web vs. mass market advertising. On the Internet someone is actively sitting in front of a computer and clicking the mouse, typing in key words, searching, reading, and is actively (on both a physical and mental level) engaged in the medium. The user is seeking something, trying to accomplish something, or trying to BUY SOMETHING!

The difference is stark, but it boils down to a simple principle of push vs. pull. In almost all forms of advertising the marketer is trying to push the ad and information at someone by getting their attention and getting them to see the ad and hopefully remember some aspect of it. They are battling for even a millisecond of our attention and minute fraction of our memory. If we breeze

by their ad, go into the kitchen at the commercial or are distracted in the least their high dollar ad might as well have not even been there for all the good it did them.

Now let's put this into a practical example you can relate to. When you are reading a book do you want someone coming up and talking to you? Probably not, because it is a distraction and you aren't able to focus on what you want, which is to read the book in your hands. Contrast this with sitting on bus or train next to someone and just looking out the window. In this case would you mind if the person sitting next to you starting talking to you. Maybe, but you would probably be more open to the distraction, especially if you weren't really doing anything else at the moment.

The Internet Difference

As pointed out above when people are using the Internet they generally have a reason for it. They are seeking or pulling information. They are actively engaged in doing something and just like when you are trying to read a book they don't want a distraction. Want to take a guess what a blinking, dancing, Flash banner is?

I have argued for years that the copy on a web site is one if not the most critical elements of a web site. Yes, it is true; those plain old boring non moving alpha numeric symbols that have been around for a few thousand years are one of the most important things on the Internet.

The Internet is a lot of things and it will become a lot more in the future, but one thing it is for sure is a source of information. This information can be delivered in a variety of formats, but text based reading is still one of the most important delivery methods for most information. Copy can be skimmed and searched for certain phrases or key words by the user. It can be read intensely and slowly or quickly. The reader is in control and that works as long as the copy has been written well because it will still do its job.

Now imagine that your company has a great product or service to tell people about and you have carefully written out a compelling case of all the benefits to the prospect and answered many of the questions they might have. Instead of taking this information and shoving it on a user whose attention you are battling to get you have a person that seeks out your information on their own and *wants* to read your information! They are 100% engaged in trying to learn more by reading what you have to say. It simply can't get any better.

Creating Unnecessary Distraction

Here you have this fully engaged person searching for you and actively reading your copy and right in the middle of this incredible process you have this Flash banner showing a sequence of meaningless pictures, dancing company logo, or worse an ad for some other product or service! You have just introduced a distraction where previously one did not exist. You just deliberately tried to make your sales process less effective!

Let me categorically state that if you have a prospect reading your web copy the last thing you want them to do is start looking at some Flash banner or ad and stop reading! If this happens they may leave and not take action, not remember what they read and not remember the contents of your Flash ad either, in other words they do nothing and remember nothing. This is exactly what you do every time that you bust out one of those Flash ads or banners that are all the rage today.

No matter what any advertising agency or web development guru says to the contrary, having someone read and engaged in the copy on your web site is vastly more important than anything else they could be doing while there. Yes, that plain old boring static text is that important. With well written copy you can get a prospect's attention, build that attention into interest, that interest into desire and that desire into action (AIDA) and action ladies and gentlemen is what you want. Nothing happens in business until somebody buys something.

When somebody starts reading your web site and ends up taking action and calls you or better yet, buys something right there on the spot...CHA-CHING!!! Cash in the bank! It simply doesn't get any better.

Now let's review. Using my model you end up with a few shillings in the bank or they can use your Flash infected web site and you end up with a frustrated, distracted, and annoyed user that if (big IF) they buy anything it was in spite of you not because of your beautiful Flash banner.

You want people to read your copy and take action. Anything you do to distract or change that outcome hurts you and in no way helps you, period.

Adding More Salt to the Gapping Wound

Now if the possibility of distracting a user to the point of not reading your copy and making a sale wasn't bad enough Flash has a number of other great ways it can crush and damage your web site marketing endeavors.

1. **Search Engines:** It has been discussed among search engine optimization experts for some time that Flash based web sites are difficult to index for most search engines. If your site doesn't get indexed it sure as heck isn't going to end up at the top of that top of the index! Now I am sure someone out there is going to argue I am wrong about this and I may be, but I have seen enough evidence to suggest I might be correct and I certainly don't want to do anything that might jeopardize my SEO efforts, and for what? A Flashy header that costs you money in lost sales.
2. **The 3% Factor:** Yes, I know Adobe is proud of their stat that says 97% of all browsers can interpret and display Flash, but I want to know about the 3% that can't. I once was shopping for a new kitchen for my house and starting checking out some of the major home improvement sites. I came to a site for a major cabinet manufacturer that sells very high end cabinets all over the world. I also happen to know they paid a development company a ton of money to develop their site. The entire navigation was in Flash.

My browser had a problem with the Flash plug in which I did not know of and when I came to the site I couldn't see any of the navigation. I was basically stuck on the home page! I really wanted to see and read the information they had there, but I couldn't get to it. What was even worse was that I didn't even know that navigation was supposed to be on the page. All I saw was one of those little x icons indicating a picture should be there or in this case a menu. **I didn't buy from them.** They lost a \$25,000 + dollar sale. Imagine if every one of the measly and insignificant 3% react this way. Can you say ouch, that could really put a damper on those 3rd quarter sales results for the Midwest territory. Any questions?

Too Fast or Too Slow: Now let's say just for the sake of argument that you found a "good" use for Flash on your site. You found a way to deliver a great sales presentation with Flash with all those great benefits dancing and whirling right in front of your customer. The person comes to your site and your awesome Flash goes into action on its own, and that is the problem. You just ripped the control away from the user and are

now forcing them to be exposed to the sales message your way. You just took a person that was pulling information and starting talking to them and pushing information at them.

This is very different from static copy because they can skim the copy looking for what they want and click on other links and navigation searching and reading. In a Flash presentation they are trapped watching your presentation at whatever speed you set and seeing only the information you thought was important. The presentation will be too fast or slow or not in the right order or missing the things they want to hear about or not answer a specific question they had. No matter how hard you try you will probably fall short of creating the perfect message.

Unfortunately for you they can simply vote with their mouse and in one click disappear from your site and visit a competitor and possibly give them the sale that should and could have been yours.

The Reversal

Just like in football with the reversal play and just to show I am not totally without heart to all the wonderful Flash of the world I am going to reverse myself...a little. I believe there are limited and good uses for Flash on the Internet. Say it isn't so, after spending several pages slicing this stuff to ribbons I am going to actually endorse the stuff! No not really, but I do believe that in the right places and with the right uses it can be beneficial. Here are a few of the examples where I believe Flash is superior to copy.

1. **Demonstrations:** The old saying is that a picture says a thousand words. Well if that is true than several pictures must say thousands of words. There are just times where trying to write out a visual description doesn't cut it. For example, on late night TV when that guy takes out the Ginsu knife and cuts a tomato can in half. Somehow I think that demonstration might lose something if I tried to describe it to you instead of showing it to you. This goes the same for certain types of computer equipment and software. According to NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) people learn and process information differently and some need to process visually. For these people as well as the examples outlined above a *well planned* Flash presentation complimenting your copy can add value.

2. **Teaching:** The Internet is an awesome tool for communicating knowledge from one person to another. Unfortunately when I want to fix a problem on my computer or solve one of those very descriptive and helpful Windows error messages or see how to do some technique in Microsoft Office I don't really have the patience to sit there and read 12 pages of tiny web text to solve my problem. I would much rather click a button and have someone just show me.

This goes for online classes as well. I know that signing up for an online class and reading all the stuff the instructor places in the content area or puts out in a chat sessions is supposed to be a revolution in higher education, but I have my doubts. Many people have to see and hear something to really learn it and they are not unique in this regard. If the teacher used a simple web cam and created a video of his or her lecture these people could learn something much more quickly and effectively than reading through tons of text on the web. There is some teaching going like this, but the bulk of it is still performed with chat rooms, bulletin boards, reading assignments and other text based only learning methods.

Another example along these lines is tutorials or teaching someone to do some type of activity in a software package. It is much easier to use a little video on how to fade a picture in Photoshop than to read 3 pages of help files to figure it out.

Now that some of you are thinking that after reading several pages of arguments against Flash that I just sold you out let me set a few ground rules. Like any good tool there are good uses and bad uses. The above items are good uses for Flash, but used in the wrong context can create bad outcomes. Here are few of the rules for using Flash effectively in one of the above formats.

1. **Copy Compliments:** The copy on your site is not replaced by this Flash. If you have a Flash demo of your product put it in the copy. As the person reads they will eventually come to a button that they have to push to start the Flash demo. It doesn't just go off when they land on the page. It is a piece and extension of the copy and the watching of it is a planned event. You tell the person in the copy what the Flash includes and how long it will last. In other words you set up the use you don't just spring it on them.
2. **I+I = I3:** Make sure if you use Flash it adds to the sales presentation and isn't simply a rehash of what you wrote in the copy. It should build on what you wrote and give a demo, teach, or create that "you have to see it" effect. The Flash presentation and copy

create a kind of synergy that works harmoniously together and is greater than the sum of their individual parts. In other words they need each other to communicate a complete message. Again this should be planned and not just thrown onto the page. The user should be in control and execute this Flash presentation when they are ready.

3. **Plan Your Communication - Work Your Plan:** In scuba diving you are taught to always plan your dive and dive your plan. In other words know what you will be doing and then follow it. In web marketing it is the same. Plan strategic uses for your Flash into your sales or communication process. Study the entire flow and presentation. Figure out how Flash enhances the process and test it with focus groups to insure you are correct.

A sales presentation should be a carefully choreographed plan and once you have planned it out in detail then dive (follow) your plan. Don't simply throw Flash onto a page because you can. It must serve a purpose and that purpose must be a valid one and build on rather than detract from what you are trying to accomplish.

Conclusion

With 97% of all browsers we can create an Internet with nearly ubiquitous Flash elements, but this is a mistake. Flash is simply a tool in the developer's toolbox, but unfortunately for many developers this has become the only tool they use. Remember the old saying if the only tool you have is a hammer every problem looks like a nail.

Simply sprinkling Flash elements around your site that don't add to your sales process simply distracts otherwise fully engaged prospects. Distracted prospects don't buy. You should much rather have someone read your copy and buy at the end than demonstrate your artistic or technical prowess with Flash any day of the week; especially when the former involves you making money and the later costs you money...in more ways than one. First, you pay to develop the Flash pieces and then you pay in lost sales because of distracted users. That is like double taxation! I say throw the tea in the harbor and let's start a revolution! Stop using unnecessary Flash.

The Internet is unlike other advertising mediums your prospects are pulling information and you don't have to push it upon them like you do with almost every other form of marketing where you are competing for their attention and hoping to create an "impression" for your ad.

Remember Flash doesn't just distract your users it can also hurt your web strategy in a number of other ways including with search engine rankings and indexing, speed of presentation, and the number, albeit small, of people that can't see or display Flash in their browser for some reason.

Finally, while I believe Flash hurts a lot more than it will ever help I also believe in the right circumstances and for the right reasons it can actually enhance your sales process or web site value. You need to plan exactly how this will work with and compliment your process and how its use will augment your sales process and not detract from it. I strongly recommend you test your sales process with focus groups and users that represent your typical audience before you release it live. Many a marketing disasters could have been avoided with a little simple testing.

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