Flash – and why you shouldn’t use it

What is Adobe Flash Anyway?

Flash is a Adobe technology used for animation. It was not necessarily conceived for the web (originally it was aimed at multimedia CD presentations) and it has a number of problems that makes it a poor solution for a web site. In my view, you can’t really call a Flash web site, a web site: it is more a presentation in a web browser.

Drawbacks to Adobe Flash

1. A browser plugin is required to play the animation. The plugin is called Shockwave and about 5% of people do not have it installed and available to their browser (at the time of writing. Software has since been discontinued). These people get a grey hole in their screen instead of your flash presentation.
2. Search engines are blind to Flash. They can not read or infer anything about a flash web site. There is a program that can turn a Flash presentation into an HTML web site so it can be indexed by search engines, but you will be punished if you forward one audience (human) to the flash, the the other audience (machine) to the HTML. This is called “cloaking”, and will earn you much more than 10 minutes in the search engine sin bin.
3. How strange is that “enter” or “skip intro” button. Weird huh? Just let me into the site, I want to get on with what I came here for! How many human hours are lost to making people click that button before they get anything useful.
4. Companies tend to use Flash to present their brand ahead

of the content on their site. While this may stroke their ego it does nothing for the casual visitor. Ask yourself the last time you really wanted to take a close look at a company logo rather than find out what they had on offer. Never right? Content always wins over eye candy.

5. Flash can not easily be changed. You will have to return to the source to get text and images changed. Also, special tools are required. You can edit an HTML document in Notepad, the most basic text editor on your computer, but to change a Flash presentation you need a $700 program and many, many more hours. If you had some 20 something make your Flash web site, chances are they will have moved on by the time you need to return to them for changes.
6. Finally Flash is an oxymoron. There is nothing flash about Flash. Most Flash web sites are very slow to load. They are useless to modem users.

Usability expert Jakob Nielsen has more to add in this article: Flash: 99% Bad

So What's Good About It? People Use it, there must be Advantages?

Young designers (25 yrs and under) love Flash. It moves and makes sounds. As an experience it is closer to Television and beats boring old static web pages hands down, besides all you can do with a web page is read it and look at pictures right?

The best use I have seen of Flash is image viewing, like Simple Viewer and product display animations that allow the user to rotate the product, open or disassemble the pieces etc. In other words, the Flash is doing a specific function within a wider framework.

So is Flash ever any good?

Well, yes. If used judiciously, so as not to create a download burden and hide the site from search engines. Maybe to animate a logo or banner area, but not the whole page, and definitely no “enter” button.

Summary

As a web site owners you have to ask yourself is my web *cool* or *tool*. Should it entertain, or is there a serious function to perform. If you want to be taken seriously by humans and search engines, stay away from Flash. The Flash presentation as a web site will be more costly to maintain.

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