

Why Your Web Site Can Have Several Different Looks

One of the great challenges of web site design is the fact that it's impossible to know for sure what each web site visitor is seeing on his or her screen. The fact is, what looks one way on my monitor can end up looking somewhat different on yours. Or what looks a certain way on your home monitor may not match perfectly to what you see when you look at the same web site from your office.

What's going on here? A familiar analogy is television. In your living room you may have a 72-inch liquid crystal television that makes you feel like you're right in the picture. The colors are vibrant and the clarity is beyond belief. At the same time, in your bedroom you may have an older 14-inch television that you've had in the house for a few years. These two screens are obviously going to display the same program quite differently.

While this is an extreme example, it gives you an idea of what's going on when looking at web sites on computer monitors. There are simply too many variables in the technology that we (web designers and web site owners) have little control over.

A few common reasons a site may display different from computer to computer

- **Laptop vs. Desktop Computer**

If you're using a laptop computer, try this quick little experiment: Sit in front your monitor as you usually do. Now, move your chair back an inch. Or tilt your monitor slightly forward or backward.

On many laptops, when you change your viewing angle to the screen, even slightly, you're going to see a significant shift in colors. Dark blue may become light blue, or some other color altogether.

When you think about all of the possible viewing angles for each visitor to your web site, you can see that there's just no way to be certain of what your visitors will see.

- **Operating System Differences**

Most computers in use today run one of the many varieties of the Windows operating system. The second most popular system is Apple's Macintosh. Each of these systems comes with its own set of fonts, and only a few of these can be found on both systems. So if your site specifies a Windows-only font, Apple computers will have to substitute one of their fonts, and already you've got a different look, even if only slightly.

Another difference between systems is the brightness they assign to the monitor. Macintosh computers create a brighter image than computers running the Windows operating system, so this can make for another difference in the way your site appears on different computers.

- **Browser Differences**

The most popular web browser currently in use is Microsoft's Internet Explorer. But there are a variety of other browsers that the user can also pick from (Firefox, Safari, etc.). Each of these browsers displays the web site code (HTML) somewhat differently. Sometimes the differences are minor, yet they do add to the slight variations in what you will see when viewing the site in different locations.

- **Color, Brightness and Contrast**

Just as with a television, computer monitors can be adjusted to any level of brightness, color saturation, or contrast. Many people simply take their monitor out of the box and plug it in, without adjusting the settings. While the factory settings may be fine, there's always the possibility that the settings are not correct for the monitor's placement (a bright window, for instance).

Additionally, as monitors age they need to be adjusted to compensate. Unfortunately, a lot of people don't bother to do this and accept that what they see on the monitor is fine. And, as mentioned in the first example, viewing angle to the screen, particularly on laptops, can have a significant effect on visual perception.

- **Monitor Size and Screen Resolution**

Another common issue is that the size of the monitor and browser window can affect the appearance of a site. Some people choose to let their web browser fill their entire screen, no matter how large or small. Other people may choose to make it smaller so they can see part of their desktop.

The resolution settings of the monitor can also affect the display (common settings are 1024, 1280, for 1680 pixels wide, but there are many other options). So your site may end up scrunched together or spread out, depending on their setting.

Conclusion

Finally, even if two monitors are perfectly matched side by side, both with equal settings, there still may be differences in how a web site looks. This can be due to something as basic as slight differences in the manufacturing process of the monitor.

So what's the solution to all of this? First of all, just accept the fact that your web site will look somewhat different to different people. Unlike print media, where all copies of a magazine or newspaper will look identical, there are many factors beyond our control.

Secondly, work with a designer who is aware of these difficulties and has strategies to deal with them. Even though your site won't be identical everywhere, at least it can be attractive and functional on all systems.