



Website design methodology

Interactive communication

One-on-one customer interaction must be considered critical for all types of corporations, in order to create new business opportunities, and capitalize on them.

Interactive communication creates a dialogue between sender and recipient, which closes the gap between communication and actual transaction, and creates clear return-on-investment on marketing investments. Interactivity also paves the way for increased brand awareness and customer loyalty, and lays a foundation for strong, sustainable long-term customer relations. This way, interactivity helps marketing in achieving concrete sales effects that are clearly visible on the bottom line.

My work with interactive communication circles around three key issues, issues that I consider paramount to all successful communication on the Internet:

- 1 MOTIVATION
- 2 UNDERSTANDING
- 3 ENGAGEMENT

I will expand on the reasoning behind these key issues below, and also try to identify key conditions that must be met to in order to successfully reach the targeted audience.

MOTIVATION

KEY CONDITION: *identification*

Motivation is a key issue for all forms of communication. Lack of interest creates a gap between sender and recipient, which means that concrete communicative results can be difficult to achieve.

Therefore, a sender must pay special attention to how to make their message more appealing and urgent to the recipient, so that the gap between sender and recipient may be bridged.

A critical condition to achieve this is that the recipient be given some form of possibility to *identify* with the message. This is something that is often overlooked in modern communication, especially on the Internet. There are many forms of useful information and functionality, but a human presence and genuine understanding for

the recipient's situation is often lacking. This of course makes it more difficult for the recipient to assimilate the information.

It has been our experience that great results can be achieved in getting a recipient to take in a message by enabling *identification*, i e to work towards using people or characters as bearers of complex messages, and thus allow the recipient to get in a relevant, constructive mindset. Only when the message reaches the recipient on a personal level can the recipient make the information their own.

UNDERSTANDING

KEY CONDITION: *time*

I often work with demanding, complex brands, products and issues characterized by many interwoven layers of information that may essentially be impossible to do justice in a shorter, more condensed format, such as for instance a banner campaign or a microsite. These issues pose great demands on both sender and recipient in order to establish successful communication.

It is therefore critical to first and foremost phrase the message and its associated issues and problems in a distinct and comprehensive way, but it is equally important to ensure that the presentation of the complex issue in question is given the time it requires to sink in.

I therefore consider *time* to be a key condition.

If the recipient is to attain a clear and strong understanding of complex issues, and really understand in what way they are relevant to him or her, you simply must create a communicative framework in which the recipient is motivated enough to spend more time with the message than what is normally the case in traditional marketing.

An excellent way of accomplishing this is to create a strong dramaturgical framework to support the subject in question, where a coherent story can help pull the recipient through the whole message from start to finish, and thus keep the recipient stimulated over a longer period of time.

ENGAGEMENT

KEY CONDITION: *interaction*

Without a pre-existing interest or commitment, it is difficult to reach out to a target audience and actually influence it. The Internet today is a mass medium and becomes an increasingly mundane and omnipresent phenomenon, where multitudes of messages struggle to make themselves heard.

To permanently change people's perceptions of issues that may be complex or perhaps even of lesser interest to the target audience, a sender must be able to continuously penetrate the attention of the target audience and successively make the message more urgent to them.

Therefore, iteration through *continuous interaction* is a key condition.

To ensure continuous engagement on the Internet, and attract a target audience to make repeat visits, you as a sender must make yourself accessible for interaction with the target audience. One-way-communication is simply not adequate.

Forms of communication that allow for a high degree of repetitive interaction are found in games and social media. Games in the sense that they create *stickiness*, i.e. an experience that the recipient constantly wants more of. Social media because it provides a forum for the recipient where he or she can make themselves heard, which allows for a long-term engagement.

Project methodology

I work on a daily basis with clients characterized by a great demand for dependability and reliability (for instance Ericsson, DHL, IKEA). My experience with the complicated and unique combination of systems development and media production means that I am very keen on methodic quality assurance, while also being highly aware of the need for time- and cost-efficient solutions.

I always pay close attention to careful planning and preparation, including a serious risk- and problem assessment process, at the outset of each project. I carry out all tasks in controlled and iterative steps. This means I am generally able to predict and identify potential problems at an early stage and can prevent them from causing delays and/or quality deficiencies.

PHILOSOPHY

My philosophy is that small, specialized and networking niche players can achieve better and more cost-efficient results than larger generalist companies, who usually only strive to cover as many different competences as possible, without considering the loss of quality incurred due to their lack of focus. Their offering is mainly one of convenience, not efficiency or quality.

Cooperation and networking is at the very core of my business. I wish to work in close collaboration with my clients and partners and believe that this increases both commitment and sense of responsibility. Accessibility, openness and flexibility are ideals that I strive to honor to the best of our ability.

CONSULTATION, CREATION, PRODUCTION

I work with client relations in three different stages:

1. CONSULTATION, where my focus lies on strategic research and analysis. My aim in this phase is to help the client define what to him/her is *the unknown*, that is: analyzing the market and the competitors and defining important factors and correlations that might not be known or apparent to the client. This phase means that I take on an *advisory* role.
2. CREATION, a phase where I apply a tactical perspective and strive to translate the analysis into communicative messages. Here, I focus on achieving what the client will perceive to be *the unexpected*, i e an idea or concept that is fresh and presumably surprising, both to the client and to the target group. In this phase, my role is mainly *creative, conceptual* and *communicative*.
3. PRODUCTION, a phase where I strive to be as concrete and operative as possible, aiming to deliver what the client by now considers to be *the expected*, i e the results that the previous two phases have already outlined. The goal is to attain predictable results within a given budget and timeframe. Here, my role is mainly of a producing nature.

SUCCESS FACTORS

One of the prerequisites for a successful collaboration is *frequent updates* – preferably on a daily basis. A good way of securing this is that all parties involved not only communicate frequently, but also that they sit together if possible. As an individual consultant, I am very flexible in this regard. I am open to temporary relocation where required.

Another key factor in order to achieve a successful collaboration is that there exists an *absolute, irrefutable agreement* of *what* is to be produced, and exactly *when* it is to be produced. Of course, this is a question of detailed planning, but also the raising of realistic milestones and protecting the integrity of the schedule at all costs – i e to not allow for sudden, impulsive changes or additions without a consensus based on careful considerations.

A third important success factor is a *shared vision*. It is crucial that the initial stages of a project be dedicated to synchronizing the view of all parties involved on what is to be accomplished, and how this is to be measured. Misunderstandings and poor communication in this respect can have catastrophic effects the longer a project continues.

Finally, a few words on the importance of a *serious, realistic risk assessment*. The more potential risks that can be identified before the project is initiated, the better the chances of remedying problems quickly and efficiently, minimizing costs and loss of time, ensuring a better end result.

CRITICAL DOCUMENTS

There are a number of critical documents that need to be drafted at the beginning of every project:

- LEGAL AGREEMENT – to define all legal aspects of the project
- SCHEDULE – detailed planning of all activities, milestones and checkpoints
- PROJECT MANNING – who does what in the project and who answers to whom
- STRUCTURE – a plan for the information structure of the project
- DELIVERABLES – a complete list of what is to be delivered and when
- SPECIFICATIONS – System-, Functionality and Content specifications
- CRITERIA – on what grounds the project shall be evaluated and by whom

After the project is initiated, some additional documents may be required:

- MEETING PROTOCOLS – documentation of what is decided during meetings
- CORRECTION REPORTS – documentation of bugs that are discovered
- EVALUATION REPORT – a final evaluation of the project after it is finished

PROJECT SCHEDULE

My projects usually follow the same general structure:

A. CONSULTATION

RESPONSIBLE: Client Manager (CM), Project Leader (PL), Creative Director (CD)

1. REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL Handled by CM (i.e. the person who owns the relation to the client)
2. MEETING WITH CLIENT Relevant people participating; PL and CD minimum.
3. PROJECT MEETING The client's needs are analyzed and a tentative solution is outlined
- PL, CD, DL, SL, TL

- Business needs are identified
 - Communicative needs are identified
 - Technical needs are identified
4. PROJECT SPECIFICATION (based on attached checklist). Detailed either by the client or PL, CD, DL, SL, TL
 5. BUDGETING Costs are budgeted, resources are specified and a rough schedule is laid down - PL, CD
 6. PROPOSAL Written by PL and/or CD. Evaluated and approved by CM
 7. ORDER CONFIRMATION/SERVICES AGREEMENT written by PL upon approval of proposal by client

B. CREATION

RESPONSIBLE: Script Lead (DL), Design Lead (DL), Tech Lead (TL)

1. CONTENT INVENTORY (synopsis) - CD and SL
2. CONTENT STRUCTURE (structure schematic and/or flow chart) - CD, SL and possibly TL (in systems oriented projects)
3. CONTENT CONCEPTUALIZATION AND PACKAGING (design outline) - CD and DL
4. CLICKABLE PROTOTYPE - DL and TL
5. CLIENT APPROVAL - PL

C. PRODUCTION

RESPONSIBLE: All respective resources, led by PL and CD

1. PRODUCTION PLANNING PL writes work orders to all resources
2. SYSTEMS SOLUTION - TL and subordinate resources
3. CONTENT PRODUCTION - DL, SL and subordinate resources
 - text (script, copy)
 - graphics, illustration, photography
 - animation
 - video

4. CONTENT PROGRAMMING (interactivity, presentation programming) - TL and subordinate resources
5. CONTENT IMPLEMENTATION (built into systems solution) - TL and subordinate resources
6. SOLUTION TESTED AND REFINED - CD, TL, DL, SL
 - Alpha version
 - Beta version
7. EVALUATION BY CLIENT - PL
 - Request for corrections (included in the price)
 - Request for additions and/or changes (billed at an agreed hourly rate)
8. CORRECTIONS, ADDITIONS, CHANGES - TL, DL, SL and subordinate resources
9. CLIENT APPROVAL - PL
10. LAUNCH, HOSTING- PL and TL
- II. PROJECT EVALUATION- PL

Design methodology

To describe how my approach web design assignments, I will below outline the fundamental principles of my design methodology. This material can also be viewed online at <http://jay.sojdelius.com/designmethodology/>

THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

A web designer's role can be summarized in nine simple principles:

1. ASKS QUESTIONS

Very few clients are trained communicators and therefore may have problems expressing themselves in regards to the requirements for their website. Also, websites are still a relatively new phenomenon on the arena of corporate communication and so the channel may not have a predefined role in the scope of a client's marketing plan. It is therefore the designer's responsibility to facilitate decisionmaking regarding website development from a visual communication perspective. Part of this responsibility can be assumed by simply asking the right questions. A list of useful questions can be found at the end of this document in the form of a communicative checklist.

2. CLARIFIES THE CONTENT

Whatever the purpose of the website one is expected to design, the task above all others is to make the content clear, visible and accessible for the target audience. Too often is the graphic design on a collision course with the content, making it purposefully less accessible and more difficult to interpret than desirable. This is very rarely meaningful. One must ask oneself how the design can *emphasize* the content, not obstruct it.

3. VISUALIZES THE STRUCTURE

Much of the content that pervades the Internet is essentially not information but raw data. For a recipient to be able to transform data to information and eventually knowledge, all data must be structured and be made intelligible by the addition of coherence and pattern. As a designer, one fills a crucial role in this process by contributing to organizing the data in a relevant form, presenting it in a decodeable fashion and establishing a context that places the information in an informative light. To structure information using graphic design in this manner is commonly known as *information design*.

4. FACILITATES NAVIGATION

After having structured the content, one must provide the user with a tool or an interface with which to navigate it. This is a cornerstone in all interactive media. Navigation of

traditional media seldom requires special attention on the part of a graphic designer – after all, most people require no assistance in understanding how a magazine or a book is to be "navigated"... With interactive media however, the navigation of information is a relatively new paradigm.

5. COMMUNICATES THE PURPOSE

To many, it sadly seems to come as a surprise that graphic design can actually be used to communicate. People are commonly expecting that message and meaning should be conveyed by text alone, and that the graphic designer is only expected to contribute a superficial veneer. But the designer's importance as a visual communicator cannot be overstated. If a message is to truly reach the recipient, the designer must know which emotional strings to play to strengthen it, and also be familiar with the many possible communicative pitfalls one needs to avoid to not alienate ones audience or give off conflicting, confusing signals.

6. INVITES TO INTERACTION

The Internet is not a passive medium like television or literature; mediums that allow the recipient to lean back and simply become a spectator. First of all, every website must attract its own audience – it does not appear on its own accord, just by turning on a computer. Secondly, it is not sufficient to merely make content intelligible by providing structure, or accessible by providing a navigation interface. One must also instill confidence between the sender and the recipient and stimulate interaction between them. All interactive media allow the user some form of control over the content. This is perhaps the most important condition for true interactivity, where sender and recipient engage in continuous dialogue constituting a nearly equal relationship. As a graphic designer, one is responsible for laying the foundation for and initiating this dialogue. One might liken it to a conversation, where the design acts as the initial greeting.

7. CONVEYS FEELING

The Internet is usually considered to be a medium characterized mainly by logic, rationality and information. But this reveals a fairly cool, distanced view of the many people who connect to the Internet on a daily basis and spend time there. After all, human beings are not emotionless computation units. However neutral and dispassionate a website may appear to be, the target audience will still relate to it on some emotional level. And it is the designer who creates the basis for this emotion. Graphic design has the capacity to create feelings such as excitement, nostalgia, melancholy or joy as an emotional framework for a website that would otherwise have passed by unnoticed.

8. ESTABLISHES THE CORPORATE IDENTITY

A website is far too often treated as an isolated occurrence in the collected visual presence of an organization. It is not uncommon in the realm of branding that corporate identity is inconsistently applied and very often it is proven to be precisely the website of a company that diverges from the norm. There is rarely a good excuse for this. Most website owners have invested substantially both in terms of time and money to establish a uniform visual profile for all their visual communication efforts, in for instance TV-spots, brochures, print-ads etcetera. As a webdesigner, one must either find a way of integrating the client's visual identity in ones designs, or else find convincing and well-founded reasons why the website should be kept separate from other media.

9. MAKES A BIG IMPACT WITH SMALL MEANS

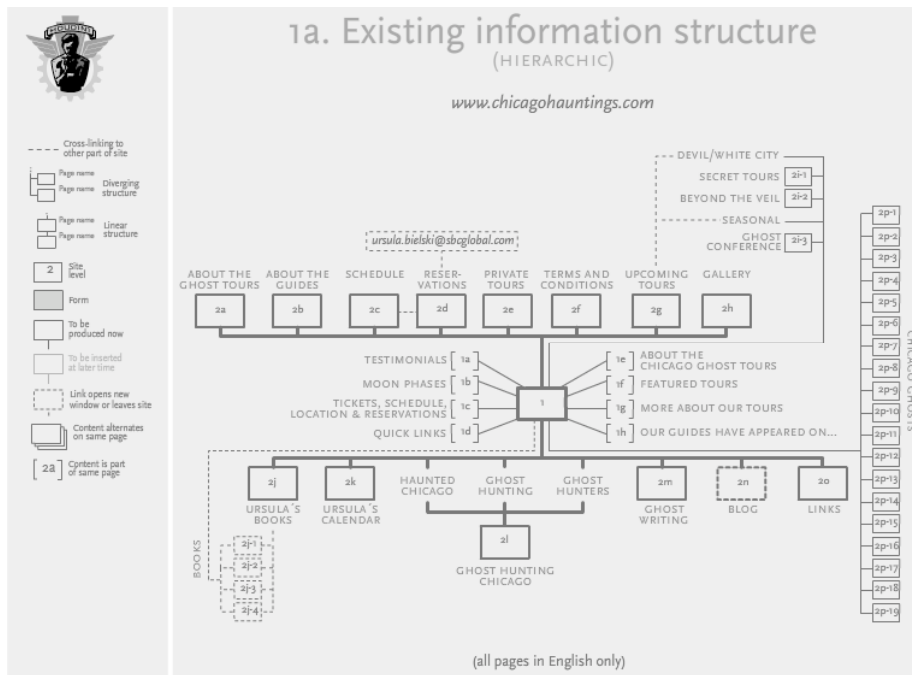
Limitations with regards to performance, bandwidth and transfer speeds are unfortunately still important aspects of all Internet-based communication and will most likely remain so during many more years to come, especially seeing how developments in the bandwidth area are quickly engulfed by ever increasing content loads. From this perspective, the designer has an important part to play. It is in many ways ones ability to create economical graphics, minimize loading times and conversely maximize the visual impact that detemines how appealing a website will be to the user.

CONTENT BEFORE STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE BEFORE DESIGN

To create both a functional information structure and a visual disposition that helps users orient themselves and navigate the site, I work with website structure according to the principle "*content before structure, structure before design*". The rationale behind this principle is that there must exist a content inventory before a structure can be built, to establish what kind of information will make up the content of the site. The structure, in turn, must be built before design or décor can be applied, as it is very costly and time-consuming to carry out changes to the structure of a website with a finished design in place.

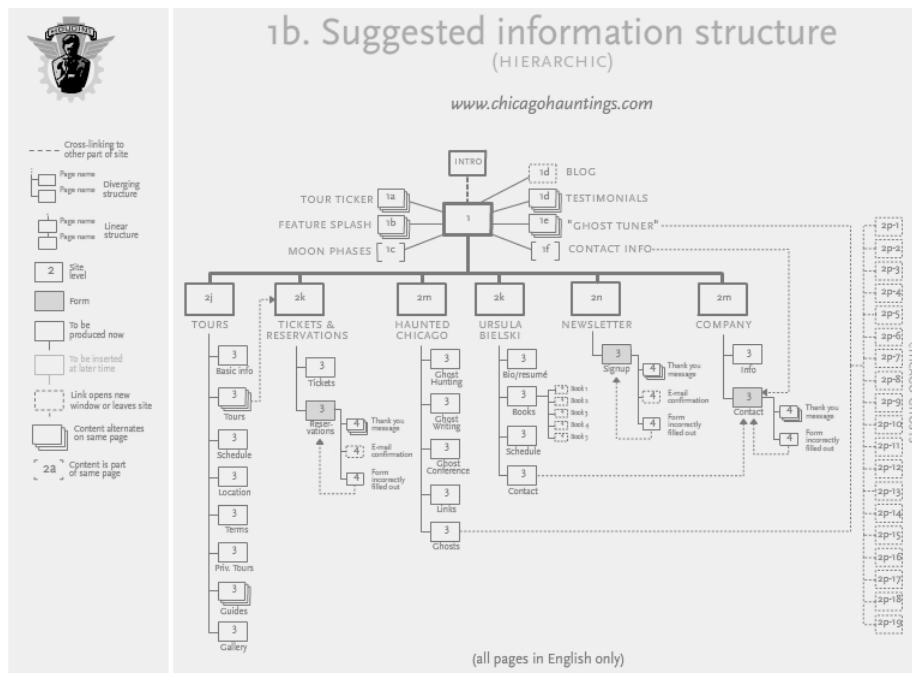
STEP 1: CONTENT INVENTORY

Content can be inventoried and examined either in simple list format, or, in the case of a redesign, as an information hierarchy tree chart, based on an analysis of an existing website. See example below.



STEP 2: INFORMATION STRUCTURE

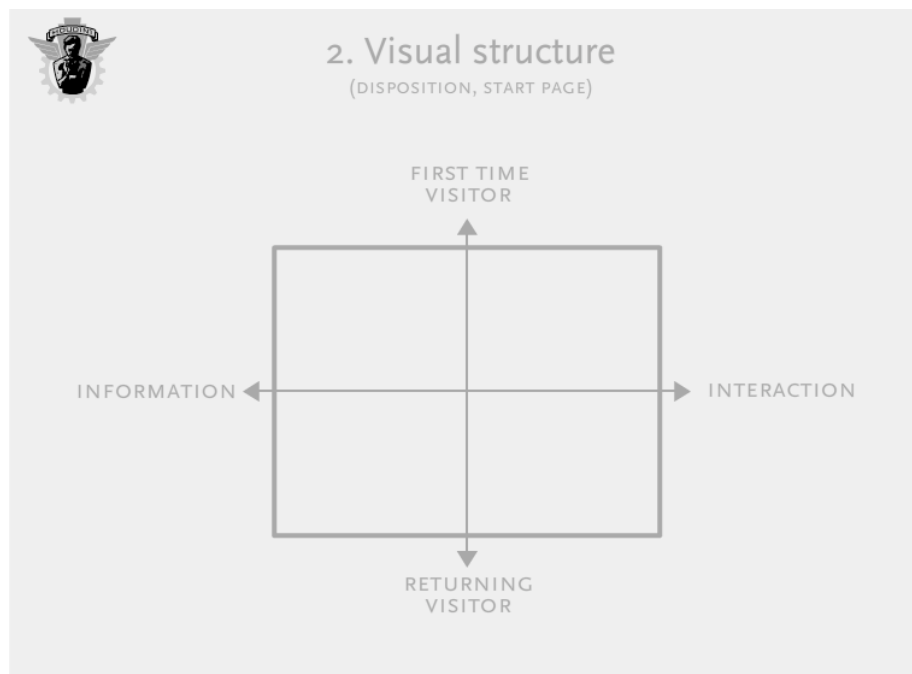
Once the content has been examined, to verify that everything that is supposed to go on the site is there, the content can be structured into a revised information hierarchy, such as the tree chart below.



STEP 3: VISUAL DISPOSITION

The third step, once the client has agreed on this new structure, is to try to transform this chart into a simple, schematic visual segmentation.

The structure of a website is always manifested in some form of visual disposition, which in simplified terms might be referred to as a layout. The ultimate purpose of this disposition is to adapt the visual organization of the content to the behaviours and needs of the target audience. The objective should be a more appropriate and communicative website, while facilitating navigation for the respective target audiences. I use a simple model for this segmentation where two parameters are cross-referenced: the user's general Internet experience and possible previous knowledge of the website (vertical axis), and the user's purpose for visiting the website (horizontal axis).



The vertical axis of the model represents the difference between the needs of first time visitors vs those of repeat visitors. The horizontal axis represents the difference between visitors seeking information and visitors seeking to interact.

The reasoning behind this model is that all visitors have different needs and purposes for visiting a website, and different types of content will therefore suit visitors differently. There is therefore a need to establish a correlation between the needs of the users and the placement of content.

VERTICAL SEGMENTATION

The vertical segmentation is based on the premise that an inexperienced user will react negatively to a visually complex array of elements if these are placed too high on the webpage. Inexperienced first-time visitors will experience difficulty scanning a web page and therefore, given that the gaze of a visitor is initially focused on the upper left-hand side of a page, material that is aimed at this type of visitor must be placed at the top.

Experienced/repeat visitors, on the other hand, have an easier time scanning a web page. Consequently, complex and detailed information and/or functionality should be placed as far down on a webpage as possible, where an experienced user will have no problem locating it, while its placement will not deter an inexperienced user.

HORIZONTAL SEGMENTATION

The horizontal segmentation, in turn, implies that content of an informative character, which is intended to be read and experienced, be placed to the left on a website. Again, reading conventions of the western world dictate that the gaze of the reader gravitates towards the upper left hand corner of a page, to commence scanning the content.

As a consequence, all content of a usable nature (such as interactive elements and/or practical content that requires the user's active participation) should be placed to the right on the webpage. This is in accordance with the fact that most users will find it natural to control physical aids such as for instance a mouse with their right hand – a principle that should also be transferable to a graphic user interface.

In addition to this, from a communication standpoint, it would be prudent for most website owners to 1) first create interest with help of the content on the site, and 2) then use this interest as a premise for interaction – for instance shop, download material, get in contact, sign up for a newsletter etcetera. So, in essence, a website owner should try to motivate users to move from the top left to the bottom right; from being interested to actually taking action. This is a dispositional rationale that would feel natural to most people.

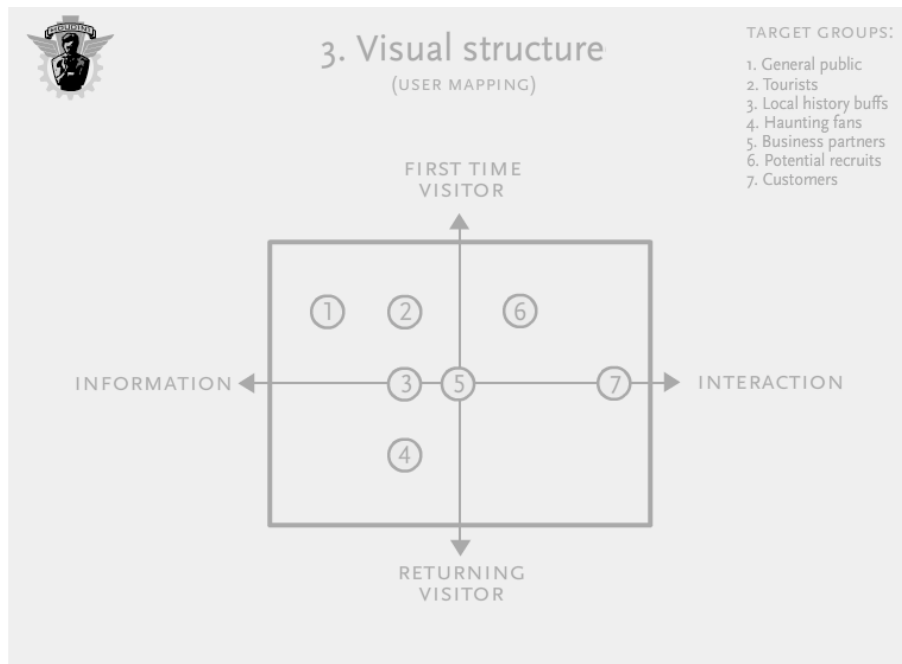
The currently prevailing norm to place menus, links and navigational elements to the left on a webpage would logically require the user to mentally cross their right arm in

front of themselves in order to navigate the page – much like if the gearstick of a car was to be placed on the left hand side of the steering wheel. This can hardly be a natural disposition. In fact, the somewhat inconsequential tendency towards left-hand menus on webpages has no practical purpose; it is quite simply a product of early webpage layout limitations, and is not consistent with the multifaceted and sophisticated user requirements of today.

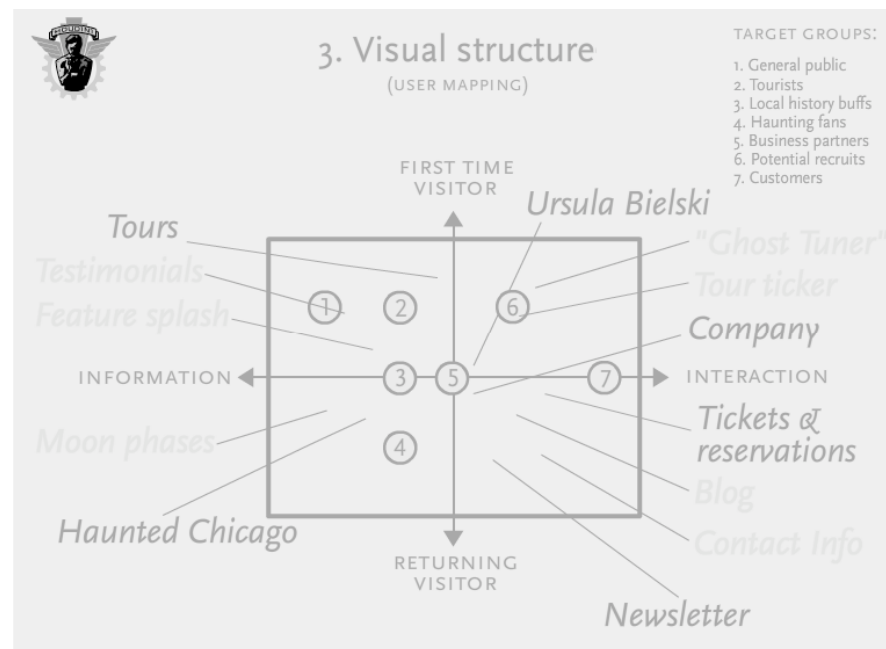
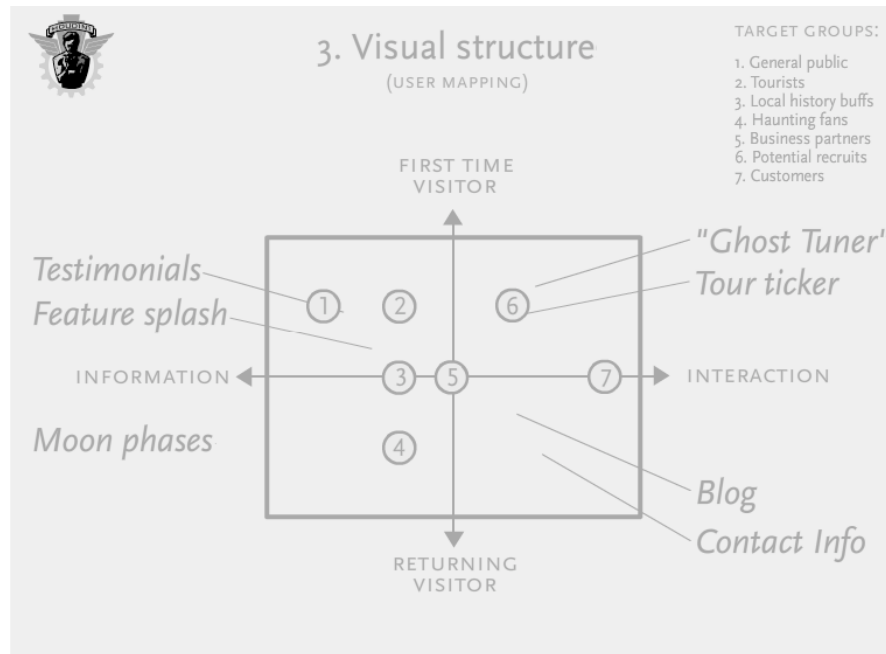
USER MAPPING AND CONTENT MAPPING

Having established the the principles governing the vertical and horizontal axis, I analyze how the user and the content correlates. This is done by what I call User Mapping and Content Mapping.

USER MAPPING begins with an assessment of the different stakeholders of the website, to analyze what their needs, prerequisites and goals are. I begin with simply listing all the target groups identified by the client, assigning them a number and then mapping them onto the previously established abstract representation of the web page.

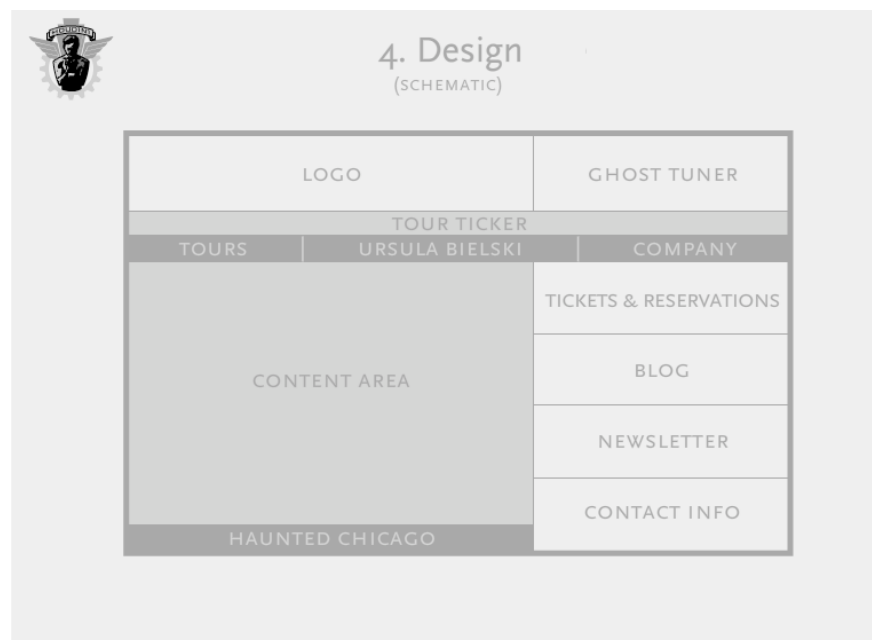
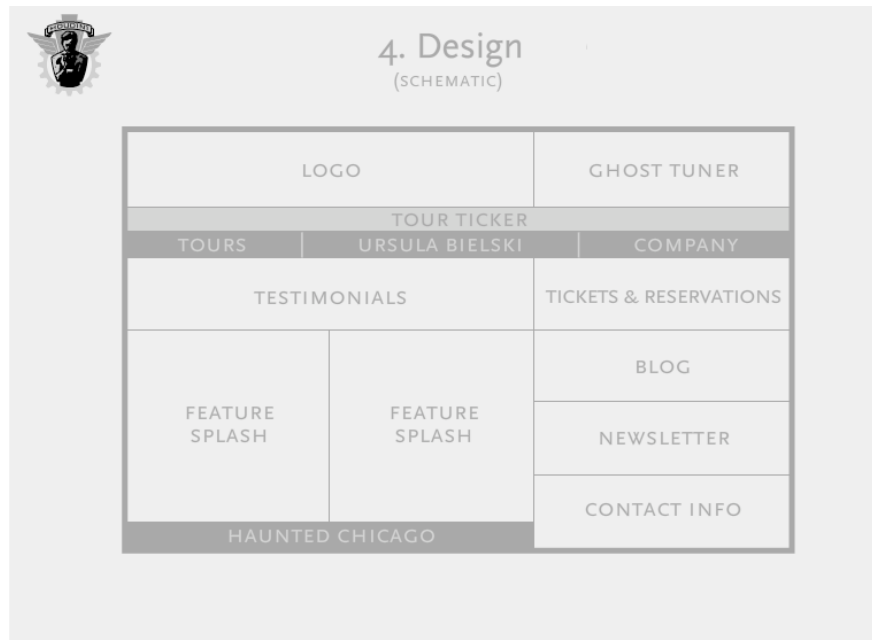


CONTENT MAPPING follows, once the users have been classified and mapped. The content can be applied onto the same chart, preferably structured into a few simple categories. During this process, it can be assessed how certain categories of content match the needs of different types of visitors.



LAYOUT

With the user- and content mapping done, I create an actual layout based on the schematic disposition above. This helps in placing actual content (such as navigation objects, decor, text, images etc) on the page and ensure it is accessible and decipherable to the different kinds of visitors to the site. The layout is typically rendered as so-called *wireframe* outlines.



STEP 4: STYLE

The fourth and final step is to apply a style onto this layout, i.e. colours, textures, typefaces, borders, backgrounds etc. It is important to have an agreement on the structure and disposition of a website before applying a decor or a style, since the style must harmonize with the purpose of the site and the requirements of its visitors. It is very costly to keep redesigning a website if the structure is flawed – you may get an esthetic upgrade but the site itself will still be unusable.

