

# **Buttons: Use Or Not To Use? Good and Bad Examples of Using Interactive Buttons**

## **Introduction**

Navigation is one of the most important design aspects of any web site. For a website to be successful, a user must be able to easily navigate through the pages. Although most web designers will agree that there are certain dos and don'ts for web site navigation, there are few definitive rules about using buttons. However, after reading several viewpoints discussing website design and looking at many websites, it is this researcher's conclusion that there should be. In short, buttons should only be used if the design of each button is germane to the site, the buttons increase the ease to which a user may navigate the site, and the organization of the site would be well served by the use of buttons. In fact, there are many sites in which the use of buttons would detract from the overall presentation of the site, and therefore, should not be used. For the purposes of this study, websites were examined based on the entry or home page alone.

## **Significance of the Topic**

Although not often discussed, the use or misuse of buttons can radically affect a website. However, it is difficult to decide when to use or not use buttons. Learning aspects of web design entails more than looking in books. The best way to learn about certain design aspects is to compare and contrast many different sites. Since navigation is such an integral part of most websites, how that navigation is handled becomes inherent in whether a website is successful or not. Therefore, such a study into the use and misuse of buttons is a worthy endeavor. Through comparison, I hope to compile a reference list about when to use or not use constructed buttons as part of a home page navigation scheme. For clarification, a button is any graphic or text box so constructed so that the user knows by some interactivity within the site which selection he or she is about to choose.

## **Discussion**

First, why is it important to have buttons at all? Why not just use text links? The reason is that links that offer a degree of interactivity will entice users to stay a while on that page and/or site. According to the Yale Style Manual,

“Providing a rich set of graphic navigation and interactivity links within your Web pages will pull the user's attention down the page, weaning them away from the general-purpose browser links, and drawing them further into your content.”

It is important to remember that the name of the game is to keep the user on your site. If a user is interested and stimulated by the interactivity, he or she is more likely to stay.

There is another reason to include more graphical navigation. Such types of navigation can be designed to be repeated throughout the site, offering users consistency and continuity:

“By providing your own consistent and predictable set of navigation buttons, you also help give the user a sense of your site's organization, and makes the logic and order of your site visually explicit” (Yale Style Manual).

Finally, web designers need to be aware of the differences between textual clues and graphic clues. In terms of using hypertext links, it is important to consider what a user thinks about when looking at those links:

“Electronic documents provide none of the physical cues we take for granted in assessing information. When we see a Web hypertext link on the page, we have few cues to where we will be led, how much information is at the other end of the link, and exactly how the linked information relates to the current page” (Yale Style Manual).

Therefore, buttons as graphical navigational tools can be useful because they can bring in and keep interested users, create consistency and continuity throughout a web site, and offer more information about what each link will do.

However, just because there are many advantages to using buttons doesn't mean they should always be used. Diane Wilson said,

“Understatement works surprisingly well on the web...Don't waste time, don't waste pages, don't waste bandwidth. Don't let any distractions take [the] attention away. Your opening page is a contract with [the user]; it's your promise of what you're going to deliver.” (Rules...)

In other words, if the buttons are overbearing, they become a distraction instead of an enhancement. How a user interprets the homepage buttons is a lot like how an interviewer interprets the clothing of a prospective employee. If the potential employee presents him or herself in tacky clothing in loud colors, the interviewer is going to make assumptions about what kind of person the potential employee is. Some good advice can be found on a site called “Web page design for designers.” In a section discussing navigation, it says,

“In choosing styles for navigational elements you should try to reach a balance between aesthetics and functionality. In the endeavor to be creative and stylish, it is all too easy to overlook basic functionality.”

So, use buttons to enhance a website, but be careful not to overdo it. In an effort to explain this juxtaposition, Robin Williams and John Tollett offered an example of a website that did not have appropriate buttons (148). “This page has a nice image and a nice logo, but the BIG buttons overwhelm the page” (148). On this example of a page of a website, over 30% of the page was taken up by three big buttons. However, Williams and Tollett made a point of including another site that also had big buttons, a web site for the AARP. Since the intended audience was retired people, people who would appreciate big font sizes, having big buttons was appropriate (150). Therefore, the decision to incorporate buttons on the home page should depend upon what the buttons will do, how they will do it, and how the buttons relate to the purpose of the website. This is not always an easy balance to achieve.

For example, take a look at <http://www.funranch.com>. There were navigation tabs along the horizontal border, however on the left hand side there were two large buttons. One said “Copycat” and the other said “Fenced In”. Both buttons are bright yellow, although the rest of the site has deep reds and browns against a backdrop of bright blue. I had no idea where these links would lead or why I would want to find out. These two buttons looked completely out of place.

Another bad example of button usage can be found on both <http://www.coupons.com> and <http://www.improvenow.com/>. Both of the sites are guilty of the same thing: using buttons as headers or bullets. The problem with doing this is that most users are conditioned when it comes to buttons. They expect buttons to take them someplace. By using this design, some users may become frustrated.

In contrast, take a look at <http://www.bigfootbob.com>. This is the site for Big Foot Bob and The Toe Tappers. There was a graphic representation of a foot, and each of the toes became a button with a text label. In this case, the buttons were not overwhelming; instead, they were useful and germane to the design of the site as a whole. Another site that uses buttons well is <http://www.randomhouse.com/seussville/>. This is the site for Dr. Seuss. This site has a row of circular buttons. In each button is a Dr. Seuss character with a text label underneath. The mouseover effect is a small movement of the character and the text label changes color. In this instance, these buttons are the only objects on the screen besides the header, and therefore obvious for the intended audience, children. The buttons enhance the site by making the site colorful, interesting, and user-friendly. Furthermore, the representations of the buttons are meaningful to the site as a whole.

Some sites didn’t have buttons, but would have really been better if the designer had incorporated some. For example, on the site <http://everything2.com>, there is a long list of links. Each text link is underlined with a blue underline, indicating it is a hypertext link. Then, between each link is a thick black line. In essence, each link is underlined twice. The end effect is horrible. This site would have been better off using some buttons for each link.

However, there were many instances in my research where I realized that the use of any button would not be appropriate. For example, on the site Women’s Resources on the Web (<http://www.dsiegel.com/women/>), I realized that having buttons would be more of a distraction than an enhancement. On this page, there is a graphic representation of two flood lights. In the white of the lights are two lists of links. To have used buttons instead of plain text links would have been too much. In this case, the beauty of the page won out over the functionality of the potential buttons.

## **Summary**

Navigational buttons can be a great aspect in many web designs. When considering whether to use interactive buttons in a web design, consider the following points:

- 1) The button should add to the functionality of the site. It should be clear to the user where the user will go by using the button. The buttons should organize the information and make the information more available for a user to choose and navigate. Don't use buttons as bullets.
- 2) The buttons should match the site. They should be representative of the site design as a whole. Such a design will bring continuity and consistency to the web site.
- 3) Buttons should have an element of interactivity to engage the user. Whether this kind of interactivity is in the form of a roll over, such as the text label changing colors when the mouse rolls over the link, or another kind of interactivity, is up to the designer. However, using such interactivity might lead to a user staying on the site.
- 4) Finally, there is a judgment call to make about whether the buttons overwhelm a site. The goal should be functionality, engagement and unity without overdoing it. However, keep in mind that some sites are better left without buttons.

## References

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Yale Style Manual. [Online]. Available:

<http://info.med.yale.edu/cairn/manual/interface/navigaton.html>

[2000, November 6].

### **Related Links on the Web for the Topic:**

Good Examples of Button Usage:

<http://www.bigfootbob.com>

<http://www.randomhouse.com/seussville/>

<http://customatix.com/cutomatix/common/homepage/HompageGeneral.po>

<http://www.understanding.com/>

<http://www.intelplay.com/home.htm>

<http://www.eldoradowines.org/edwa.htm>

<http://www.bostonseafood.com>

<http://www.nitastacy.com>

Bad Examples of Button Usage:

<http://www.coupons.com>

<http://www.improvenow.com/>

<http://www.funranch.com>

<http://www.powerup.com.au/~sevloid/webtips/design/purpose.htm>

Good Examples of Sites That Correctly Decided Not to Use Standout Buttons:

<http://www.evoice.com/home.html>

<http://info.netscape.com>

<http://mediatrip.com/home/index.html>

<http://www.dsiegel.com/women/>

Some Sites That Probably Should Have Used Buttons:

<http://everything2.com>

<http://www.freeworks.com>

<http://modernhumorist.com/mh/0009/history/index.cfm>

<http://voice.media.org/essays/tveye.html>

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