Fact or Fad? Keeping Pace with Technology

Technology continues to influence the future direction of website development, & designers need to take that middle road between falling behind or cutting themselves on the bleeding edge.

Technology can sometimes seem like a runaway train that's barrelling down a winding track at immeasurable speeds, gaining velocity the more you resist it. Those who are not directly involved with technology can feel like helpless passengers, swept up by the unstoppable momentum of a train that's driven by a minority of techies, but affecting a majority of the population.

The technology train will forge ahead regardless of what you do. But if you rush forward blindly you might jump the track and end up in a ditch; and if you resist too much, you'll fall farther and farther behind as you try desperately to keep pace with nothing more than a manual, hand-pump car.

Web designers—especially those who don't have a technology or programming background—can feel the pressures of having to keep up with this technology. They have to wade through all the marketing hype to determine what's going to be a future web design standard and what's a "here today, gone tomorrow" fad. How are designers supposed to decide what technologies and tools to use when those technologies and tools keep changing on them?

TECHNOTOPIA VS. TECHNOPHOBIA

With the interdependence of design and technology, it's getting more and more difficult to separate one from the other (see "Jack of Both Trades: The marriage of design and technology," pages 20-22, in the April/May 2007, V12N2, issue of *Dynamic Graphics*). And when it comes to web technologies, designers need to avoid the two extremes that can negatively impact their profession and work:

1. Embracing the bleeding edge. New is not always better. By using bleeding-edge technology—technology that hasn't been widely tested or accepted in production environments—designers risk the integrity and long-term stability of a website. They allow themselves to become the technology industry's guinea pigs; and worst of all, they make their clients unwitting participants.

2. Resisting technological change. Standing still and refusing to adapt to new technology standards is just as dangerous as rushing ahead. People resist change for all kinds of reasons—they get attached to what's familiar and comfortable, they fear the unknown, they're too busy to learn something new, or they're unable or unwilling to adapt to new standards. Continuing to use outdated technology and refusing to adjust to changes in website design standards not only stunts designers' professional growth and limits their skill-set, it also greatly shortens the lifespan of the websites they build.

STAYING ON TRACK WITH TECHNOLOGY

It's best to avoid taking a black-and-white view of technology. For all it offers to the design community, technology should still be taken in moderation. It allows designers to do incredible things with websites, but it's not a panacea. The best way to keep pace with technology without taking a high-speed header off a cliff is to adopt a cautious middle path and follow some simple rules:

1. Stay sharp. As a designer, it's up to you to decide which technologies to add to your arsenal of design tools and what to use for your projects. You don't necessarily need to immerse yourself in the technology industry, but you should—at the very least—keep up with what is out there. Subscribe to some independent web-design newsletters or RSS feeds that deal with the technical side of web design. This will give you a good indication of where the industry's heading.

2. Seek trend analyses from independent sources. Experienced IT professionals often cringe collectively—brought on by caution or cynicism—whenever a software company's CEO or CIO makes a public prediction about future technology trends. If you pay attention, you'll notice that the CEO or CIO's "predictions" about the industry always happen to match their company's R&D project

schedule. Company leaders have a vested interest in driving customers and users to their products or services; their so-called analyses are not always objective and impartial.

3. Give bleeding-edge technology a wide berth. In the software industry, it's advisable to steer clear of software with a "1.0" tag—especially large and complex software. Version 1.0 software is usually a glorified beta. The same principle applies to new technology. While it's perfectly fine—and in most cases, advisable—to experiment with new technology on your own time, you should never use untested technology with client projects. You don't want to have to deal with the growing pains and misadventures associated with using new and unproven technology when clients are investing hundreds or thousands of dollars on your services. They're paying you to deliver a stable website, not to play mad scientist.

4. Get your hands dirty. Theory will only teach you so much. Every designer has his or her own method of working; what's simple and streamlined to one may seem awkward and labored to another.

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Only through practical hands-on experimentation can designers get a feel for how a particular technology will work for them—just make sure you don't use it on a client project if you're not yet confident of your abilities.

5. Don't stress yourself out. You use a machine in the design process, but you're not one yourself. Don't try to absorb the entire technological spectrum at once or you're going to be overcome by the sheer amount of information available. If you obsess over technology and keeping up with it, you'll stress yourself out and end up accomplishing little. Take your time and focus on what will work for you, your projects and your clients.

TECHNOLOGY HAS NO TERMINUS
Forging ahead blindly doesn't equate to progress. Progress requires more than forward motion; it requires foresight and a well-defined goal. Those not accustomed to the speed of technology can find it confusing and overwhelming—but it doesn't have to be. It's possible to keep pace with the technology train—and perhaps even enjoy the ride—without getting derailed. ⓖ