

The effectiveness of Web sites for sign shops is a hotly debated issue. Some swear that it has really helped their bottom line, while others think that it has been a waste of time and/or money. I have two Web sites—one for my main business, and the other is strictly focused on selling logos via the Web. Both have been successful in bringing in additional revenue.

What they have done as well is help the sales process along. To me, that is one of the big advantages of a professional Web site—the potential client has an opportunity to view your portfolio online. He can gauge what type of business he is dealing with, and see the quality of work that this company produces. When a prospect calls me and hasn't seen my work, I direct them to view my Web site before we meet. When we finally do meet, they've already seen the work that I produce, and are usually already sold on having me do their work.

Just as a good Web site can help you, a poorly designed one can hurt you. I've seen a lot of Web sites for sign shops that are amateurish and don't showcase the shop's work well. I'm not sure if that's because the sign shop owners tried to design it, or if they just hired a poor designer. Unless you've got a lot of experience designing Web sites, you're not going to just throw up a Web site that looks very professional. There

*You're in the business of building images for others—
and your Web site's job is to build your shop's image*

Designing a Web site for your shop

by Dan Antonelli

are a few too many tricks to cohesive Web design to master on your first site. I've got about 25 Web sites under my belt—and I'm still learning new things with every new Web design project.

I sometimes get calls for Web design from people who tried to do it themselves, but failed to create a professional image for their business. Or, they used a Web designer who didn't understand their business, and therefore couldn't showcase their work properly. Such was the case with Rich Dombey, of Rich Designs, Inc. [*SignCraft*, May/June 1986, March/April 1990] in Belle Mead, New Jersey.

A call from a Jersey-style master

Rich called me in October. He was interested in developing a brochure and Web site for his business to help enhance his

already prestigious reputation. After recovering from the shock of getting a call from this "Jersey Style" legend, I composed myself enough to talk about what I could do to help.

Rich already had a Web site that someone had designed, but it wasn't doing its job. It presented his work (which is outstanding) in a manner that was less than flattering. And, Rich wanted a brochure that showcased his work. He also wanted the brochure and Web site to present a cohesive identity for his company, along with a new full-color business card.

So, I agreed to take on the job of helping to enhance his image, and give Rich some additional marketing tools. Rich sent some photos and his logo (which he asked to be "Antonellized"), along with some rough copy that he wanted to appear on his brochure and Web site. I designed a simple 11-by-17 brochure that folded in half to 8½ by 11. I designed it to be printed on a Canon Fiery color printer; to save some cost since Rich only needed a hundred or so copies. [See *Create an affordable full-color brochure for your shop*, *SignCraft*, November/December 1998].



Rich's new brochure and business card with the newly revised logo

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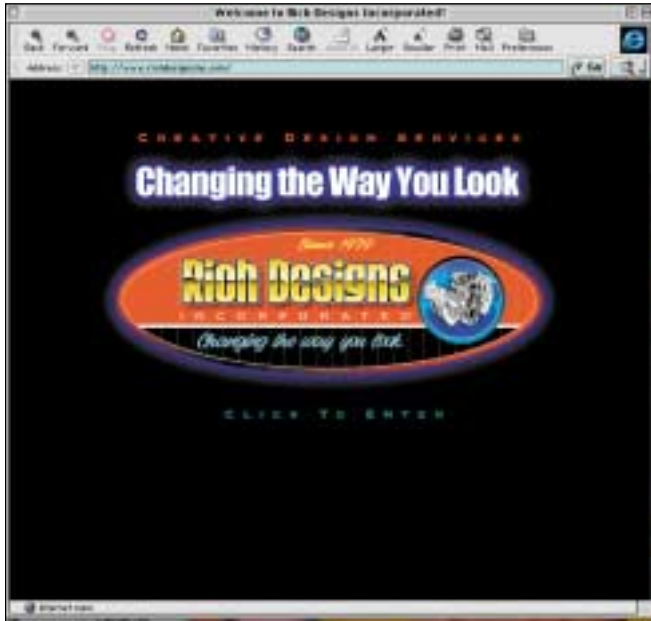


Figure 1. Give them a little taste of what's to come!

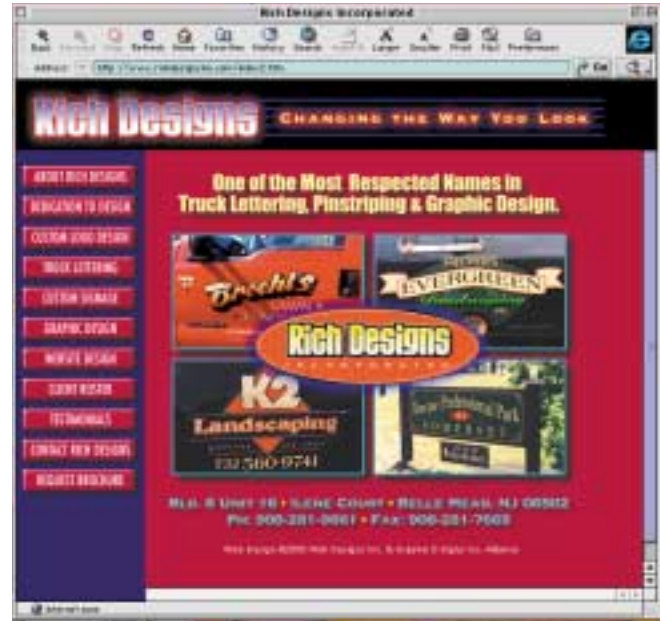


Figure 2. Inside the site. The left navigation and the top bar are stationary at all times. The only part of the site that scrolls is in the maroon frame.

The bread-and-butter buttons

Most sites utilize consistent buttons that people expect to see when visiting a site. Here's a list of a few of the "regulars."

About: Here's where we can talk a little more in detail about our business, our dedication to the craft, our experience, awards, honors, etc. You may or may not want to include a picture of your shop, shop truck, employees, or even you.

Contact us: Don't make them go crazy trying to find where your E-mail address or phone number is! Give them a button to link directly to your E-mail.

Services: I'm not a big fan of a Services button because it means you have to go further into the site to find out what services you

offer. Assuming you don't offer a dozen different categories of services, I prefer to have separate buttons for each service that links them to that page, where you can explain that service and give examples. For Rich, we broke his services into Logo Design, Truck Lettering, Custom Signage, (plus the buttons for me—Web Site Design and Graphic Design).

Request brochure or info: This is a handy way to have people submit a form to you that requests you contact them. It's more professional than a standard E-mail link. And you can use it to find out what the customer is interested in before you contact them. For Rich, we made a page for people to request a copy of his new brochure. This is a useful way to generate leads.

Portfolio: Depending on how you structure your site, you may want to have a separate section with photos of all your work. For Rich, we included the portfolio or gallery into each subsection. There were three main galleries: Custom Logo Design, Truck Lettering, and Custom Signage.

Client roster: We added into Rich's site a listing of his clients. This adds tremendous credibility to his company.

Testimonials: Why not highlight your success stories with testimonials from satisfied clients? We used a few favorable letters Rich received, and also pictures of the work that was referenced to give real life examples of positive outcomes. □

Framing the Web site

Now came the fun part—designing the Web site (www.richdesignsinc.com). I first proposed to Rich an outline of his entire site, and how the navigation would function. I included the button names, and what they would link to. Additionally, I outlined how I wanted to showcase his work through separate gallery pages that would allow the viewer to page through some of Rich's work. I also decided that Rich's site would be a frame-based Web site.

While Rich gave me some insight into what colors he liked, and some design characteristics that he'd like to see incorporated into his site, he basically let me run with it to see what I would come up with. We also agreed that Rich would offer some of my services through his Web site through a brokering arrangement we worked out. So, I added a Graphic Design and Web Site Design section that would showcase my work, which Rich in turn could sell to his existing customers.

Designing the Web site

I decided that the first thing I wanted people to hit when they went to Rich's site was a cool "splash" page (Figure 1). This would give the viewer just a taste of what was to come. The viewer then clicks to enter the main part of the site (Figure 2).

If you visit this site, you'll notice that the large graphics on the first two pages are "sliced." This means the image is broken into smaller pieces, which makes the whole page load faster.

I created a header graphic "Rich Designs—Changing the Way You Look" that stays stationary in the top frame. I want to make sure the viewer always sees that, because it's an important part of the marketing message. I then designed interactive Java-based buttons which "rollover" when the mouse

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hovers on them. This is a little more professional than plain buttons which have no action.

Next, I created title header (Figure 3) graphics that would appear at the start of each internal page. These headers help provide consistency to the site, and let the viewer know right away which section they are in (Figure 4).

Displaying the work

I decided to display Rich's work into three different galleries: Custom Logo Design, Truck Lettering, and Custom Signage. Each section

would have an introduction page that described that particular line of business, and a rollover button on the bottom for the viewer to click to enter into the gallery (Figure 5). Once in the gallery, at the bottom of each, I put Next and Previous buttons to guide the viewer through that gallery.

Many sign shop Web sites utilize small thumbnail images of signs that blow up into larger photos. I've found that to be a very cumbersome way to view the photos. Instead, I show two or three decent-sized (but not huge!)

photos per page. This is a good trade-off on load time, and detail (Figure 6).

Scanning the photos

The key to showcasing your work is getting the photos to pop up quickly so that the viewer isn't growing bored as each photo creeps down the page. I scanned all the photos in at 150 dpi, and then cut them back down to 72 dpi in Photoshop. I also retouched and sharpened most of the photos to get them to appear crisper.

Then I exported them in Fireworks, where I added a soft drop shadow on each photo on a maroon background. Using Fireworks export feature, I saved the image as a jpg, at 80% quality. This gives you a manageable file size that can import quickly, and doesn't sacrifice too much detail and quality.



Figure 3. Sample title header graphics that appear at the start of each section

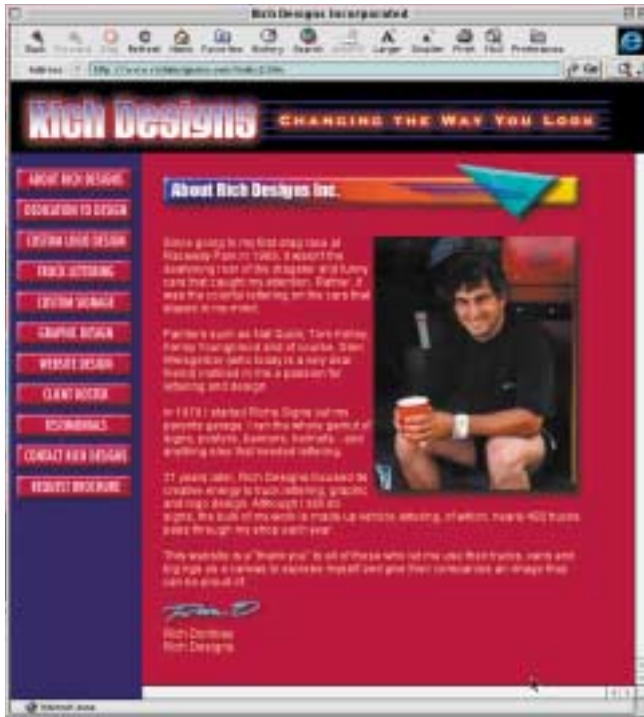


Figure 4. Consistent use of the title graphic, making sure it appears in the same place each time a sub page is loaded, adds an extra level of professionalism to the site.



Figure 5. Intro into the gallery for Truck Lettering. This is where you can go into some detail about what makes your lettering unique.

I also was careful to be consistent in the sizing of each photo. I think the photos display much cleaner if they are all the same size. All of Rich's photos are 330 pixels wide, and the file size for each photo is under 20k.

**Two key sections:
About Rich Designs and
Dedication to Design**

We decided to include two sections that speak of Rich's experience in helping other businesses enhance their image, and his dedication to good design. This helps educate the reader about Rich's many years of services, and the importance he places on design—not just lettering.

**Educating the
customer is now easier**

I asked Rich how his Web site has been working out since we launched it a few weeks ago. "The response has been overwhelmingly positive," says Rich. "The Web site has really aided me in bringing a newfound respect for good design work, and has helped legitimize my desire to give people quality work. People are getting less involved in their design, and trusting my better judgment more.



Dan Antonelli's shop Graphic D-Signs, Inc. is in Union, New Jersey. You can email him at dan@graphicd-signs.com. Or, you can visit his "rather plain looking Web site"

(as Dan puts it), at www.graphicd-signs.com. His book, Logo Design for Small Business, is available from SignCraft. To order, use the order form bound into this issue, or send \$25 plus \$6 shipping and handling to SignCraft, PO Box 60031, Ft. Myers, FL 33906.

**There's more on
www.signcraft.com**

Click on Features to read:
■ Create An Affordable, Full-color Brochure For Your Shop by Dan Antonelli from the November/December 1998 issue of SignCraft.

Rich Dombey's Web site can be found at www.richdesignsinc.com.

Most often, I care more about their design than they do.
"This Web site helps bring home

the importance of a cohesive design for their business image. The site is part of the education process for my customer's understanding of the importance of strong design. I leave off, telling all my potential clients that it's not what the design says about the business, but rather it's what the design says about the business owner that makes the difference."

It was both satisfying and frustrating for me designing Rich's site. Satisfying in that it turned out so well, and is really some of my best Web design work. Frustrating, too, because it makes my own site look so bad! Time for a redesign on my two-year-old site, I think! □

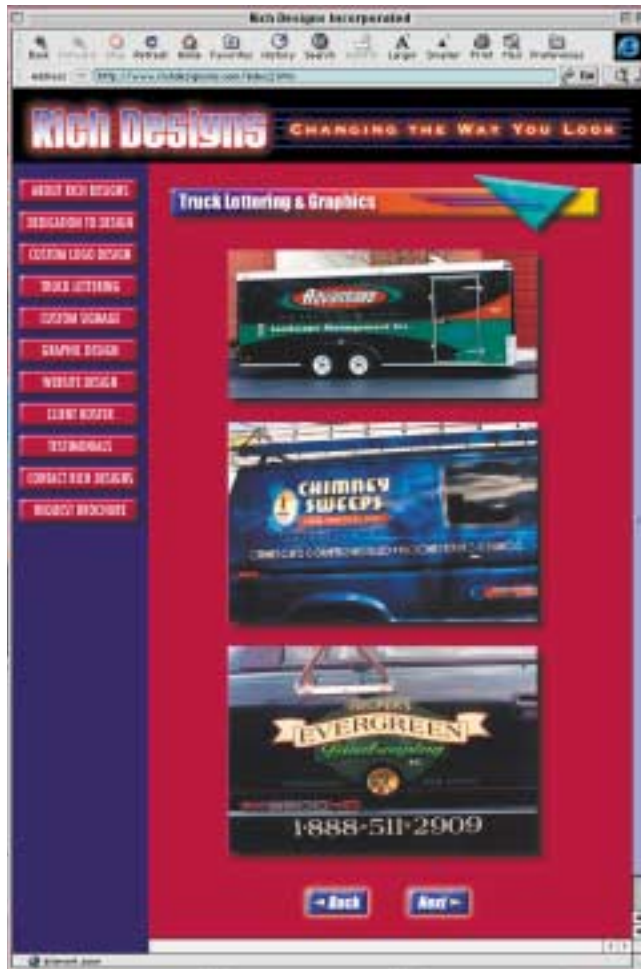


Figure 6. Inside the gallery. On my 20-in. monitor, I can see the whole page, but on most screens there will be some scrolling needed to view the pages.