



Nick Leech, director of interactive digital agency Euston Digital

to see. A consensus agreement approach is paramount if broad online appeal is to be achieved," added Leech.

### Don't monkey with minutiae

A straw poll of web contacts, fellow technology journalists and a few data and design professionals turned up some interesting opinions on this subject. At some point in their career almost everyone it seems has been unfortunate enough to be involved with a truly painful web design experience whether as a designer, a developer or indeed as a user.

A common cause of calamity is a shoddy approach to total project life cycle management. In practice this can manifest itself as a poorly balanced focus on the foundations of the web design project, so that the minutiae and detail of the job are addressed before a solid core is put in place.

### User usability is usually useful

On the hunt for calamitous communication encounters to illustrate the breakdown that can occur between the web design agency and the client, it appears that the fault does not always lie with our fat-cat business managers. Sometimes the web designer suffers from a case of 'selective hearing' and only takes on board what he or she wants to.

This situation exists most often when a designer fails to follow the usability guideline plans for a site quite simply because they think they know best. They do this because they think that nobody knows how the web works better than they do and the functionality they are being asked to build in will "make the site look rubbish", despite there being heaps of empirical data to back the original design. Compound this reality with poorly defined or (worse still) changing specifications and requirements and, well, you've got a problem haven't you? Essentially, it's all about what the user wants right?

"A website's usability factor is often an afterthought for clients and designers, usually tagged on towards the end of the development cycle. In reality, this makes little sense. Designers should equip themselves with tools for reporting on usability to highlight bad coding and design issues, but also enable real users to test for usability before a site goes live. That way, a simple issue may be solved with small changes. Larger problems that need input from the client can also be identified early, giving enough time to rectify the issue before the project goes off plan, or budget," said Shane Lovelette, product manager for the Morae usability tool at TechSmith Corporation.

What is clear in real-world web design environments is that the language used between agency and client can vary



## Get with the lingo and the leetspeak

Mark Fraser, managing director of Green Jersey Web Design Ltd, recalls an experience he encountered while using Actinic's web development tools that taught him a thing or two about the street-speak and so-called leetspeak of the new generation.

"We once submitted a design concept to one of our clients that had a definite 'edgy' image. We'd thrown everything we had into the design work and were really proud of the end results. Fifteen minutes after submitting it to their marketing director, I received an email from him with a single word response: 'Sick!' Was it really that bad? Could we have interpreted the design brief so wrongly? I wasn't looking forward to breaking the news to the team that we'd need to start all over again."

"An hour later, though, a second email from the client arrived with a detailed review of the design concept. This made it clear that, actually, they were delighted with the design and that we had definitely hit the mark just right. A quick Google search showed us that 'sick' was actually high praise indeed."

"It can be a more serious matter, though, if an agency and a client interpret key project terms differently. The most obvious example of this is the way 'sign off' is interpreted. Design agencies often assume their clients understand that signing off documentation, design work and development is a serious commitment. Proper sign off is vital to keeping a project on track, of course. But clients often don't realise the problems that can be caused if they sign off work and change their mind further down the line. Better for the project manager to actually challenge a

client's sign off when it is given – to check that they are confident with their decision at the time, and that they realise that the project's next work package will build on the one being signed off now."

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Mark Fraser, managing director, Green Jersey Web Design Ltd