

Hello, hello Netmag.

I hope this email finds you well!

I've been meaning to write to you guys for the last year or so about the website build-off section. I'll get straight to the point here, each month it just looks like the latest collection of WordPress theme front pages. Some months are better than others, but quite often it really looks like someone pulled it out of their arse last minute, bunged a hero-slider up top, maybe a left-hand nav, some feature box-outs, threw a bit of rattled-out body copy in there, highlighted some CTAs, and said "DESIGNED!". Ultimately, we get month-after-month of very similar-looking "designs".

As a developer the format does irk me somewhat too, as so often designers simply *don't think through* the problems they're trying to solve, or they think their job is just to make things "look vaguely pretty" then then expect the developer to somehow magic the right solution out of code to monkey patch their pixel-pushing. "Ok – you have a box that says 'Click here for X' – what does that actually *do*?" Perhaps I'm being a bit unfair, but it's true to say that in lots of places there's a big disconnect between design and development – they should be working together much more closely, and much earlier in the process.

So my suggestion is to update the build-off format to something that would either stretch the designers, or made them think a little past the home page, which sometimes is the most complex piece, but often times, not. Or more importantly, can only be built once the rest of the site is built, as the content and thinking has fed in from other areas of the site which have needed a decent amount of problem solving, so the home page just becomes a portal / extension of that. And on reflection, that's a big ask for the designer, so invariably something (quality, originality, content, etc) is going to suffer.

So, I'm not one to criticise without offering some ideas in return – how about these as starters for 10 to freshen things up for the Build-off?

Voting / Suggestions

Perhaps users vote for the project they'd like to see in a few months' time via twitter?

Competition

Have the build-off be the impetus for your readers to do something different. They can enter a competition one month, then they have 2 weeks to do it (like your chosen designers) but they get to win the exposure in the magazine as the prize.

Different kinds of projects

What if it wasn't just websites, but games, apps, portals, etc? Perhaps people get the impetus to work on Personal Projects?

Pick a page

Designers get to pick any page, not just the home page.

Collaboration

All designers from one issue meet on Skype, or for a beer, and get together to brainstorm the idea. They then split up to tackle a bit of the site each, or perhaps app, one does the email campaign, etc. Perhaps there's already teams out there who might like this approach, and could talk about what it's like to work together, not just how they thought of a 2-minute "Find Your Tent App!" idea

Different sets of skills

How cool would it be to have techies involved too? This could ground the designs in the real world (although sometimes it's nice to see folks blue-skying it!) but also would actually create something, rather than just a flat design. This would be great for both the techies and designers, as it would introduce them to other motivated people. Perhaps you'd have a board on the site where folks could sign up to see who would suit them, and what projects there were available to try?

Open Source it

What if the designs / projects started in the magazine were put on GitHub (PSDs, code, planning, etc) so anyone could download them and continue them? Perhaps the best could be included as a series of links in the next magazine, or there was a new site that hosted all these projects and forks so people could REALLY learn from the design / code that was created in the first place?

Real-world solutions

I've been to 4 hackathons this year, and have tackled some really fun challenges. I've done stuff with Phillips LED lights at [Hacked](#), I helped build [Mashifesto](#) at the [3 Beards Art Hack](#), and worked with an NHS anaesthetist at an [NHS Hack Day](#) to build a mobile app for the NHS (ongoing!).

What if instead of doing some random "Zombie" app, designers worked on something that would benefit the real world? An app that does something for the children in Syria, an app that helps the long-term unemployed, and app that makes sense of the various political party's manifestos? If projects were relevant to real-world events or news, that could be really cool, and the apps could perhaps progress as real projects and do some real good (especially if you're introducing folks to each other).

Anyway, I know you've a lot of pages to fill and perhaps you just want to get things done rather than have the scope run out of control, I just think that there's a lot more scope for this section, and the designers could get a lot more from it. This year for me has been a lot about the hacker mentality – I think this part of the mag could benefit from a dose of this kind of energy.

Cheers for now,
Dave Stewart