

ADWEEK.COM**PRINT THIS**Powered by **Clickability** [Click to Print](#)[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Form + Function

Digital design goes well beyond Web sites

March 10, 2008

-By Brian Morrissey



Advertisers want to build brand loyalty by providing utilities that both improve people's lives in some small way and directly pad corporate bottom lines.

NEW YORK It isn't a viral hit like Subservient Chicken, but Domino's pizza builder might be equally important. The application, built by Crispin Porter + Bogusky, lets users craft their own pizza online, name it, then have it delivered to their door.

For Jeff Benjamin, interactive cd at Crispin, the Web application that debuted early this year is a sign of where digital design is headed. Rather than craft a one-off Web site, he said, advertisers want to build brand loyalty by providing utilities that both improve people's lives in some small way -- even if it's simply a tool for customizing pizza -- and directly pad corporate bottom lines.

"The new 'viral' is going to be a business solution for clients," Benjamin said.

Funny microsites are giving way to useful, sometimes entertaining applications; the showing off of flashy technology is

yielding to design geared towards generating sales; and crafting for social interaction is replacing one-way experiences. Now that digital points exist far outside the browser, designing for the Web is passe, with digital design chasing the elusive goal of designing experiences that wrap all of the above together.

"When you create a utility, you're creating something that gives people time back," said Nick Law, CCO for North America at R/GA. "It becomes less about information as pollution and more about information to help people get through life."

Interactive design used to be synonymous with Web site design. The objective was crafting a Web experience that reflected the overall brand message. Although brand consistency is a laudable goal, many interactive designers chafed at the role of "matching luggage" to offline campaigns, often resulting in shallow microsites that mimicked TV campaigns.

Even experts in those sites are rethinking their approach. Barbarian Group, which worked with Crispin to develop Subservient Chicken, is now concentrating more on useful, content-rich sites. That means starting the design practice with the customer in mind, helping them navigate quickly through an experience or to worthwhile content, said Benjamin Palmer, CEO of Barbarian.

"Five years ago, people would muck through a site with non-standard navigation that was confusing because the whole Internet was confusing," he said. "Now the Internet is so big you can't do anything that's annoying anymore."

Often that means scaling back the special effects, like Flash sites, which take a long time to load. For Kashi, Barbarian Group built a product site last summer that centered around community and included tools for visitors to improve their lives and encourage others. For instance, tools that let users participate in daily health challenges, such as taking 30-minute walks or skipping coffee, while interacting with each other. Product information is secondary to content about a healthy lifestyle and community interaction, a leap, Palmer said, from earlier Internet design.

"The thing that's more in the forefront is designing the experience of how people are going to interact with your content," he said.

Advertisers also see the opportunity to build brand applications that allow people to do everything from customizing pizza and matching their personality with products to the planning of trips.

"The days of making funny things that may or may not have an effect on the client's business are ending," Crispin's Benjamin said.

Epson took a new design approach with "Epsonality" last fall. In the past, the Web portion of the Butler, Shine, Stern & Partners campaign would have been a microsite with a few pages of content. Instead, Butler, Shine's experiential design team melded broadband video with a personality quiz to match users with the right Epson printer for their needs.

The creative approach is admittedly tongue-in-cheek, said David Blum, executive director of interactive services at Butler, Shine. But underneath the surface is a sales generator, built by interaction designers, information architects and decision trees. A lot of thinking went into getting people "through this experience [to purchase] without just being entertained by a bunch of videos," he explained.

Application design is also driving efforts to tap into the social Web, with utilities holding the promise of being able to build communities around brands. Take "My Vegas" from Critical Mass, part of the "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" campaign. On the surface, the social networking tool seems like another attempt by a brand to draw people away from more natural social environments into artificial ones created by advertisers. But "My Vegas" actually provides a useful tool for visitors who want to get the most out of their trips, thanks to Critical Mass bringing the "stays in Vegas" promise to life with social functionality. Users can build profiles, upload photos, manage trip details, compare attractions and schedule events with friends (their "entourage," in "My Vegas" lingo). It's geared to typical Vegas vacationers, such as college buddies scattered in different cities who converge in Sin City for a weekend during March Madness.

"There's a big possibility to deliver on your brand through the tools or functionality you can give people that are positive," said David Armano, vp of creative at Critical Mass.

The next step: free the application from the confines of the site. The old build-it-and-make-them-come design strategy is being replaced by a fish-where-the-fish-are mind-set that's leading advertisers to not view their brand sites as the be-all and end-all. Garrick Schmidt, vp of user experience at Avenue A/Razorfish, part of Microsoft, said in building RedBull.com,

the shop made sure to make site features like videos, games and social-networking skins work elsewhere.

"No digital property is an island anymore," said Schmidt. "Everything can be connected to everyone. You have to design for that. We think about how we can chunk up content, and make it viral and distributable."

It's not just sexy brands that need to design for distribution. Bank of America launched a site for its "No Fee Mortgage Plus" product in the fall that included useful applications like a mortgage calculator and a mortgage comparison tool. From the beginning, Bank of America agency Organic considered how the applications can be not just on the bank's microsite, but detach to live where consumers want. "We're trying to think from the beginning of how to syndicate them out to other platforms," said Conor Brady, ecd at Organic. "That's been a mind shift for us because a year and a half ago there wasn't that expectation."

The next stop for digital design is not just out of the site, but onto other screens and into real life. Firstborn Interactive, a shop that in the past has concentrated mostly on Web projects and is moving into out-of-home design, worked with Digital Kitchen last November to build a platform to promote Windows Live where visitors to a Microsoft event in New York City could upload photos that were then beamed onto a gigantic sphere in South Street Seaport. It's now looking to use information like body heat and speed to create real-life interactive installations.

"If you think we're just going to be making Web sites in the next five years, anyone with that business model isn't going to be a business," said Dan LaCivita, executive director at Firstborn.

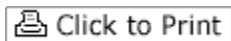
Digital shops like R/GA are busy honing their skills in out-of-home venues. Last year, R/GA started a retail practice for its work in designing in-store experiences for Verizon and other clients. Law sees interactive design moving front-and-center in new areas because a brand like Apple has shown the power of the interface in influencing consumer perceptions. His guidepost to good design: the Apple operating system.

"The functionality is apparent immediately," Law said. "It's a different way of approaching marketing. The creative has always been about telling stories. It's obscuring a truth until a punch line. It's linear. Designers want to make the message or functionality apparent immediately. It's fundamental to what we're doing in marketing."

Links referenced within this article

Find this article at:

http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/news/digital/e3i1de189927bfff758384728f89282cfd?pn=3



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.

© 2008 VNU eMedia Inc. All rights reserved.