First impressions are important. Experts tell us that the people we meet tend to make a lasting judgment of us based on the first 30 or 45 seconds of the meeting.

That’s why we all worry about our appearance when we’re about to meet an important prospect. However, in the Internet Age, our prospects may get their first glimpse of us and form their opinions through our Web sites.

Ken Kinard, chief creative officer at Accent Interactive Inc. (http://www.accentinteractive.net), a Lutherville-based Web design and multimedia firm, agrees.

“Your Web site is the highest profile communication medium in your business,” he says. “It has the widest potential audience (all Internet users) and can become a monumental force in your marketing plan.

“But creating the right site is hard work,” he advises, “and you can make the most of your effort by learning from the mistakes of others.”

After working for years designing Web sites, Kinard has developed a Top 10 list of the most common mistakes you can make when designing your Web site. Here goes.

Doing It All By Yourself: Designing a Web site is more than learning a piece of software or typing some code. Avoid the temptation to create the site in-house. Professionals do a better job in less time, and their outside perspective gives the insight that public communication needs. Web designers study how users perceive and use the Web — leverage that expertise for your bottom line.

Waiting for Tomorrow: Web projects can stall when companies hire a designer and delay in providing the content needed. Creative people tend to work best on projects with relatively short life cycles. Become a creative collaborator. If you make the project a high priority, the outside creative team will feed off of your enthusiasm and the Web site will better reflect your company culture.

Getting Everyone’s Input: When it comes to creative collaboration, less
is more. The Web site is high-profile communication, but a Web meeting doesn’t need everyone’s input. Including too many people bogs down meetings with opinions. A team of 2 to 4 key employees is usually enough to cover your bases and keep the project efficient.

**Putting the Cart before the Horse:** Most businesses creating a Web site are excited about getting a new look. They’ve seen other sites they really like, and think their message would be convincing if it looked contemporary and stylish. Designing before developing content is a trap. You can get stuck with content that no longer fits in your beloved design—an expensive problem. Form follows function.

**Building with No Architect**

Just as an architect’s plan makes a building successful, good information architecture (the way information is organized) makes a Web site intuitive and user friendly. Start with a working model of the site content before getting caught up in the look and feel. Poor information architecture results in user frustration, and pre-planning saves the expense of redoing the site.

**“Click Here”:** This is one of the most common mistakes in Web design. Avoid links that don’t say what they contain. Examples of poor link labels include: “click here,” “information,” “misc.,” “follow this link.” Links tend to stand out visually on the page and catch the eye. Users are frustrated when they are forced to go back and read the context before understanding the nature of the link.

**Playing It Safe** : Too many Web sites lack panache. If your Web site looks like many others, or doesn’t have anything unique to offer, it’s forgettable. This applies to the content and design. Marketing is about being remembered. If your designer isn’t helping you set yourself apart from the competition, get a smarter designer.

**Cotton Candy, Anyone?:** Just because a designer can create a long flashy presentation with moving phrases and hip-hop music doesn’t mean your customers want to wade through the multimedia to get to the point. Gratuitous animation and interactive showmanship detract from your message and send users searching for the “skip intro” button. Avoid eye candy and go for substance. Most people want information, not impressive bells and whistles.

**A Video Is Worth A Thousand Pictures:** Some messages are communicated best as text, others as graphics, and still others as video. Video is probably the most under-used media on the Web. Higher-level compression is making streaming video viable even for users with relatively slow Internet connections. Video’s time-based delivery gives great control of the message flow and, used effectively, it can communicate more efficiently than text and static images.

**Stale Bread Grows Mold:** Once your site is live the maintenance phase has begun. Don’t let your site get stale—keep the content fresh. What’s new in your business? Did someone in your company win an award, write an article, land a big contract, solve a customer’s problem? Put it on the Web site. Anyone who asks, “What’s new in your business?” should be able to answer his or her own question with a glance at your Web site.

From time to time I’ve heard clients and friends complain about the cost of a Web site, and often I have heard the words, “I’ll do it myself” or “We’ll take this in-house because we can do it cheaper.” However, your Web site is an integral part of your branding. Think twice before you decide to go “cheap.” As the old saying goes, none of us has enough money to afford “cheap.”

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