

Brown, Dan M. (2007). *Communicating Design: Developing Web Site Documentation for Design and Planning*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders. 352 pages.

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Most mainstream discussions about Web design seem to focus on the tactics of design, coding, or production, ignoring the fact that most successful Web projects rely on a broad set of documents to facilitate communication between designers, clients, and other project stakeholders. In *Communicating Design: Developing Web Site Documentation for Design and Planning*, Brown provides a rhetorical framework for documenting Web work by discussing three sets of documents: (1) those that describe the needs of site visitors, (2) those that detail what site visitors will experience, and (3) those that outline the site's functionality and corresponding design. Brown offers guidelines for how to create a set of deliverables with the appropriate level of detailed information based on the context within which they will be used. He describes this as a layered approach in which the first layer of detail captures only the most important elements of a given document; the second layer, a mediated one, provides some additional background and limited context to help those reading a document; and the third layer captures a significant level of detail in order to put the document within the larger context of the project. As such, Brown's advice is helpful in illustrating how to create the documentation that will most efficiently help facilitate communication between those working directly on a Web-design project and other stakeholders.

First Brown discusses the group of documents describing the needs of site visitors: personae, usability-test plans, and usability reports. The main goal of these documents is to capture the design team's understanding of site visitors, or the target audience. Although Brown's goal is not to outline the methods that individuals might employ in creating personae, he does make clear that these documents were developed based on "research techniques [that] vary from surveys and market research to interviews and ethnographic methods" (p. 16). This distinction is important because Brown appropriately does not cover much of the design and development process. As he points out, although surveys and market research are a vital part of the process, they are not necessarily part of documentation. Personae and usability test plans make it much easier for the design team and other project stakeholders to understand what site visitors will experience than if they were merely handed data from market research.

Then Brown describes the group of documents detailing what site visitors will experience: competitive analyses, concept models, and content

inventories. These documents provide additional context for the final site design although that relationship might not always be explicit. For example, the team might create a concept model to facilitate an understanding of how abstract concepts—like how to categorize products or facilitate communication—function and interrelate. Depending on the complexity of the site, Brown’s model has a fourth layer, one in which the design team might determine that concept modeling is not a necessary part of the design process and can be skipped altogether. For small sites, the same logic might also apply to content inventories because site managers can easily keep track of a handful of pages without any real documentation.

Finally, Brown explains the group of documents outlining the site’s functionality and corresponding design. These documents describe the overall approach that the design team intends to take: site maps, flowcharts, wire frames, and screen designs. But the placement of screen designs in the final chapter should not imply that they are the final part of the process even though Brown states, “This is it. This is more or less what it comes down to: the final design” (p. 311). As many usability engineers will remind us, testing as early as possible, and as often as possible, is important in Web-design projects. Consequently, screen designs might go through a number of iterations just as large projects may require multiple usability test plans.

For those working on medium- to large-sized Web designs, Brown offers a discussion of the main categories of documentation that is helpful in communicating across the design team and to other project stakeholders. Although the documentation is organized into three broad categories, this organization does not imply a sequence for these documents. As one of many possible alternatives, the following documentation sequence is one that I have used in managing my own projects and student projects:

- competitive analysis (chapter 5)
- personae (chapter 2)
- site maps (chapter 8)
- wire frames (chapter 9)
- usability test plan (chapter 3)
- screen designs (chapter 11)
- usability reports (chapter 4)

Viewing Brown’s work as a flexible heuristic for documentation provides a helpful framework for creating the appropriate documentation to ensure that the design team and other project stakeholders continue to share a common

understanding of the project and its goals from beginning to end. Although Brown claims that his approach is largely amethodological, much of the documentation he describes adapts easily to a variety of approaches for user-centered designs, such as the one hinted at in the alternative sequence that I outlined.

Brown also offers practical advice. In discussing his three-layered approach, Brown not only assists those of us who create such documentation in thinking about the appropriate level of detail to include, but he also provides solid advice on some of the potential pitfalls associated with each level. Finally, I think what Brown's approach implicitly acknowledges is that failed projects are often caused not by bad design or poor production but by the lack of effective communication between members of the design team and between the design team and other project stakeholders.

This is not a book on theory; this is a book about practice, and its focus is a pragmatic one. In looking at the book through that lens, I feel that the book would be more helpful if Brown had picked one or two design methodologies and described how readers could adapt documentation based on the specific requirements of those processes. Although experienced project managers will perhaps naturally make those adjustments, such advice would be helpful for newcomers. Additionally, experienced project managers will also realize that they need to supplement Brown's suggestions with the other types of documentation that their projects dictate. Teams should not overlook the value of mood boards, card-sort reports, budgets, and other artifacts that may more effectively communicate to various project stakeholders.

This book works especially well in upper-division communication and design courses, largely because of Brown's layered approach to documentation. Such an approach encourages students to think practically about the purpose of documentation, its intended audience, and decisions regarding how much time and effort to commit to any particular document. Whereas books like *A Practical Guide to Usability Testing* (Dumas & Redish, 1999) provide much more extensive information on how to actually conduct usability testing, the strength of Brown's work rests in his description of how documentation might be used in a classroom or workplace setting in providing a broad outline for a user-centered approach to design. Depending on the objectives of their course, instructors might use Righi and James's (2007) *User-Centered Design Stories: Real-World UCD Case Studies*, which describes nearly two-dozen case studies of user-centered design projects, as a supplemental text that would provide excellent context to Brown's discussion of documentation issues.

In sum, *Communicating Design* reflects Brown's extensive experience as a practicing Web designer and communicator. His advice should apply well and broadly to medium and large corporate, classroom, and other Web-design projects.

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## References

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- Righi, C., & James, J. (2007). *User-centered design stories: Real-world UCD case studies*. Boston: Morgan Kaufman.

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