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## **Meet the MasterMinds: Vincent Flanders on *Web Pages That Suck***

Vincent Flanders is the creator of the award-winning web site, [WebPagesThatSuck.com](http://WebPagesThatSuck.com), and co-author of the books *Web Pages That Suck: Learn Good Design by Looking at Bad Design* and its recent sequel, ***Son of Web Pages That Suck***. Flanders, his web site and books have been featured in publications, on television, radio and the Internet, including *Newsweek*, *Web World*, *Ziff-Davis TV*, and PBS. He is an authority on web design and usability, and provides consulting services for a variety of businesses.

MCNews asked Flanders to enlighten us about the pitfalls of web design and how consultants can avoid being featured in his next book.

### **MCNews: What is it about web site design that created the need for your books?**

**Flanders:** The short answer is the American education system. Unfortunately, American schools don't teach art or aesthetics, so most people don't have a clue about good design.

The longer answer is that too many designers, writers, marketing people, and others involved in getting companies on the web thought the web was the same type of medium as print or TV. It isn't, and people have had to learn that this medium has serious limitations—low bandwidth, incompatibility between browsers, different platforms, etc.—and they've tried to put a square peg in a round hole.

Another problem has to do with web design tools. Back in the "old days" we had to hand-code web sites. Now you've got [WYSIWYG](#) (What You See Is What You Get) tools, which let you create really bad web sites very quickly with no knowledge of HTML.

Finally, the dirty little secret about the web is that it isn't really as important as people thought it was going to be in the way they thought it was going to be important. We all thought we could throw up content or sell gizmos and somehow the money would come rolling in. A lot of people are into the web because it's fun and cool, but most people in the real world could care less. The irony is that the money is in the important applications that we **don't** see—corporate purchasing, for example.

### **MCNews: What two or three hints should give you a clue that your web site sucks?**

**Flanders:** Any time you see the word "paradigm" or other such MC-type words run, don't walk, away from the site. MC stands for Marketing Crap, by the way. The ultimate example of MC is a

consultant who says he's "...a frontiersman. He thrills to spend his time, his energy, and his intellect in the regions that form the margins of settled or developed territories..." Get out the shovels.

Another big clue is splash pages. There is no need for a site to have a splash, or introductory, page unless you have to offer your visitors a choice between multiple languages like they do in Canada or Switzerland. Splash pages are a huge banner that tells the world that you like to waste people's time, and they will figure that means you're going to waste their money too.

If you look at a site's home page and can't figure out what the site is about, then you've got a site that sucks like a Kirby vacuum. There are too many home pages, that even after you have read every word on it, you're not sure what it's about. One in particular talks about "content ecosystem" without defining it. What does that mean?

**MCNews:** What makes informational/service (as opposed to sales) sites succeed or fail?

**Flanders:** The main goal of an information/service site is, logically enough, to provide information. **The most common mistake consultants make is to talk about how wonderful/smart/brilliant they are.** You can tell people that you are "a voracious speed reader of 4,600 words per minute," but so what? People come to your site for one reason: to solve a problem. They don't care if you're wonderful and they probably don't care about much of anything other than "Can you solve my problem now?" You've got to convince your visitors that you can solve their problems, so the information you provide should be about that, not about you.

**MCNews:** What is "Mystery Meat Navigation" and how can you overcome it?

**Flanders:** If you have to mouse over a graphic to discover whether or not it's a link and where the link will take you, then you have what I call Mystery Meat Navigation. It's a popular technique and is totally acceptable to use on music, band, movie, or game sites, for example, but totally inappropriate to use elsewhere—like [General Tire](#). The best way to overcome it is to not use it. Unfortunately, clueless bosses and marketing weasels (I'm one so I can say it) love shiny things and we love this type of junk.

**MCNews:** How can non-technical people evaluate and select web designers so they don't end up with a web page that sucks?

**Flanders:** Ah, the \$64 question. I hear a lot of horror stories about companies spending tons of money on web design and being unhappy with the results. The truth is, I try to avoid answering the question because it would look like I'm suggesting certain designers, and that would take away my objectivity. I can only criticize a site if I didn't design it or recommend the designer who did. Otherwise, people might think I'm just extorting money to fix their sites.

**MCNews:** When you review a site, what is the most common problem you find?

**Flanders:** The most common problem is bad navigation. It's becoming impossible to find anything on a site without a search engine! On consulting sites, the biggest problem is the MC mentioned earlier.

**MCNews:** Any great web sites come to mind?

**Flanders:** The great web sites have nothing to do with commerce or information. [National Geographic](#) has a great site. There are lots of band sites that are great, but you can't use any of their techniques. My favorites are actually humor sites – [SatireWire](#), and [The Onion](#).

**MCNews: What do you see for the future of web design?**

**Flanders:** I think accessibility is going to be very important. For one thing, sites will need to provide access to the visually impaired.

I'm sure we'll see some horrible new design technique come along because that's how it's been in the past. I'd like to think that web design is going to get better, but as long as we have multiple browsers and designers who are interested in looks and not functionality, then we're doomed to more of the same.

**MCNews: What's on your reading list now?**

**Flanders:** Actually, I'm so functional it's insane. I just bought a book on Making Music Videos with Adobe Premiere. Digital is really the future.

**MCNews: Thanks. We needed that!**

Visit Vincent Flanders at [www.WebPagesThatSuck.com](http://www.WebPagesThatSuck.com) to find out more about his books and services, or write to him at [vincent9@gte.net](mailto:vincent9@gte.net).