

# Who Needs Homepages? A Reality Check for Marketers

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**F**ellow marketers, ask yourselves: how many homepages have you seen in the last year? Countless, right? But how many can you recall in any detail? Probably none.

Unfortunately, marketers have developed a real fetish for homepages. We're all guilty of it: companies see their homepage as the sacred center of their brand and marketing universe, and creative agencies obligingly trot out homepage designs as a stand-in for their entire vision of what their client's site can do.

The problem is that our homepage obsession is out of line with the way Web users actually behave. Homepages have become like suburban malls: tacky, overloaded, confusing, and out-of-date. People still go there when they have to because, heck, everything's in one place. But

they get out of there quickly, without so much as a sideways glance.

## The home page ain't what it used to be.

The indisputable fact is this: Web audiences are spending less time on homepages, and more often than not, they never see a site's homepage at all. You can credit Google with this one. By improving the effectiveness of natural search and introducing innovative paid-search advertising, Google and its followers have driven the daily droves of Web traffic deeper into sites than ever before. And if a deep dive takes you to the pearl you're seeking, why surface?

## Landing pages are on the rise.

All of this amounts to—dare I say it—a paradigm shift in Web usage. Users look to “landing pages”—the pages that link to a specific keyword or phrase—to do most of the heavy lifting on helping them assess whether a company can fulfill their needs. Which means we all need to stop futzing around

with the Flash intro on our homepages and take a hard look at how our landing pages are working.

I will officially put myself out there as a big fan of landing pages. They tend to drive higher conversion rates (at the end of the day, the only thing that matters to most of us) because they keep the user focused on achieving their specific informational/transactional goals. Which, it turns out, is also what Web users really want. When marketers' goals and users' goals align—well, it's a beautiful thing.

Take a look at your site's traffic reports and figure out what your true landing pages are. Then apply a few simple criteria to determine whether they're working hard enough to help deep-diving users:

Do they provide context to show users where they are in the site's navigation?

Do they directly address the implied audience based on the search terms that drove them there?

Do they provide a clear path to conversion without forcing the user to surface to the homepage?

## It's time to put your homepage on a diet.

Now take a look at your homepage in the harsh but revealing light of actual user behavior. Like it or not, users exit homepages like they're on fire. Strip down the function of the homepage to its true role as a roadmap to deeper content:

Give up most of the real estate devoted to that “brand window.” Use it instead to help your user segments self-identify with the right content paths.

Figure out what content users are seeking most often, and surface it on the homepage, reducing an average of three clicks to one.

Obsessively observe how visitors use your primary navigation. Prioritize high-volume links and test new navigation designs. Rinse and repeat.

Watch conversion rates climb.

Now collect a large bonus, and spend it at the mall on that penguin figurine you've been eyeballing. ■

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