

Web Design: WYSIWYG – not.

First, a little history lesson. In the beginning, there was DOS, and green monitors. Well, there were earlier beginnings, but that's as far back as we need to go today. When things got a bit more graphical, programs began to try to reproduce on the screen what the output would look like on paper, and the acronym WYSIWYG – “whizzy wig”, or what you see is what you get – was adopted. These days, computer users tend to take that for granted, but back then, it was quite something.

Fast forward to today, when everyone and their dog professes to be a web-site developer, and guess what? WYSINNWTG. Not necessarily what they get. From the view in the development program the designer uses to the end users' browser, there are a number of factors which make changes to the look of the final display.

- Older browsers may not support all of the functionality that the designer may build in
- Even a new browser may be used by a user who has chosen not to download a particular plug-in, like a Flash viewer
- Browsers from different makers and different versions of browsers interpret the same HTML and CSS in different ways, sometimes with hugely different results
- The size of the viewer's monitor will affect the largest window the browser can run in, and the size the viewer decides to make the browser window will affect the layout of the page
- The fonts installed on the viewer's machine may not include a specific font used in the web design; the browser will substitute something similar, but still different.
- Users with very slow connections will get a very different experience than users with broadband connections.
- At a more esoteric level, the viewer may decide to set up the browser with a different size of character display, or even provide an overriding set of CSS. Options to not display images, or Flash output, or to run JavaScript are all available. Users with poor or no eyesight rely on hardware or software which translates text to speech and “reads” it to them. Text in images will not be part of the output.

A web site designer tries to balance these and other considerations to provide a web site that conveys a positive image to as much of the audience as possible, but there will be hundreds of minor variations in

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what people experience. In many cases, the KISS principle works well, because the more complex the design, the more options there will be to manage.

For the small business person who is getting a new web site, or changes to an existing one, the important take-away from this article is that part of the web-designer's job is to make sure the client's web site looks and works as intended on the majority of popular platforms and secondly, that what you see in a demo is not necessarily what your customers will see. Try to involve a number of people in testing the site, and take the time to view it yourself in several different browsers; most importantly, view it on a large monitor using a variety of smaller window sizes—as the window changes shape, what happens to your content? Is that what you expected?

Remember, this is the way the whole thing is designed to work. The site designer describes the content using a markup language, and the browser decides on the “best” way to display the content to the viewer. It's just that when you want to sell an idea, one feels the need to have better control. Get used to the idea that you can't control everything, but make sure the design works for the majority of your potential clients. And give thanks that these days you don't have to worry about too many customers looking at your new masterpiece on monochrome green monitors!