

Web Design: Wireframes

Definition 1:

A skeletal version of a website or product that represents navigational concepts and page content. The term is used in two broad ways:

- A static wireframe or page schematic is a single drawing of an individual page template that shows the information components, especially the navigation, that will appear on a page, in a rough form, so that navigation components can be documented and assessed. The drawing may suggest a basic visual layout, but doesn't commit to any specific appearance.
- A dynamic wireframe is a set of cross-linked pages acting as a functional prototype of the final website without the graphical components and often with only sketchy text content (e.g. "Product description goes here."). It is often accompanied by a tree diagram or flowchart of the website. The wireframe does not address visual design or page layout.

http://www.usabilityfirst.com/glossary/term_645.txt

Definition 2:

A basic visual guide used to suggest the layout and placement of fundamental design elements in the interface design. Because of this they must be completed before any artwork is developed. When completed correctly they will provide a visual reference upon which to structure each page. Wireframes also allow for the development of variations of a layout to maintain design consistency throughout the site. This is an important part of the initial development stage because it creates user expectations and helps to develop an awareness and familiarity throughout the site.

Creating a set of wireframes for any project also acts as a communication tool to clients and stakeholders, such as content creators, engineers and developers. Over the course of a project the wireframing exercise functions as a stable base on which to consider changes, diverse user paths and new requirements. The information architect and information designer typically use the wireframes as a meeting of the minds, in terms of having solid working documents on which to establish the language, content and structure of interactions users will have with a given site or project.

The creation of wireframes also helps to define the positioning of global and secondary levels of navigation in a prominent and intuitive position, as well as providing an area for utilities such as helpful information and search facilities. When creating your wireframes it is critical to ensure that branding is central to the identity of a site so as to communicate the personality of the site.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Website_wireframe

The focus of website wireframes

Website wireframes are simple line drawings that show the placement of elements on a web page. You can save yourself a great deal of time by editing the layout of a simple wireframe at the start of the design process instead of a complex design later.

Using wireframes is a great way to begin a web site project, as it allows you and your client to focus on layout without the distraction of color, type and other design elements. Concentrate on what goes where on your web pages and the percentage of space that each element takes up, which can be determined by your client's needs.

What to Include in a Website Wireframe

All of the important elements of a web page should be represented in your website wireframe. Use simple shapes instead of actual graphics, and label them. These elements include:

- **Navigation:** buttons for users to visit the main sections of your site
- **Company logo:** should be represented by a shape
- **Content areas:** determine where your different sections of content will appear
- **Search boxes:** if applicable
- **User login areas:** if applicable

How to Create Website Wireframes

There are a variety of ways to create a website wireframe. They include:

- **Drawing it by hand on paper:** This method comes in handy when face to face with a client. Sketch out your layout ideas on paper, with a focus on what elements should go where.
- **Using Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, or other graphics software:** Most graphics software packages come equipped with all of the basic tools necessary to create wireframes. Simple lines, shapes and text (to label your elements) are all you need to create a presentable wireframe.
- **Using software created for this type of task:** While Photoshop and Illustrator can do the trick, some software packages are developed specifically for this type of work. OmniGraffle is a piece of software that simplifies the creation of wireframes by providing shape, line, arrow and text tools to use on a blank canvas.

The Benefits

With website wireframes, you have the benefit of tweaking a simple line drawing to achieve the desired layout. Rather than move complex elements around a page, it can take very little time to drag a couple of boxes into new positions. It is also much more productive for you or your client to focus on the layout first...you won't start out with comments like "I don't like that color there!" Instead, you will start with a finalized layout and structure on which to base your design.

<http://graphicdesign.about.com/od/effectivewebsites/ss/wireframes.htm>

Developing wireframes: Here are some basic steps an information architect would take when developing wireframes.

Gathering information

- **Business/Content requirements:** This information is provided in a client's initial estimate request or, more likely, you gathered in initial meeting(s). You need major site functionality, key site pages and what content/functionality would need to be presented on them.
- **Existing design requirements:** Additional information such as need to integrate with existing site guidelines or need for consistency with previous site design, etc. should also be noted.
- **Bandwidth requirements:** Some clients may have to serve a low-bandwidth user base in which case, the design will have to be more text-reliant and less image heavy.
- **Software requirements:** Some sites are CMS-driven or software driven (such as blogs). Many software packages have layout and navigation rules the design will have to conform to.

Prioritizing/grouping information: Once the information has been gathered, it is important to first group and then prioritize how they need to be displayed on the page.

Navigation strategy: Clients may have strong preferences as to how navigation should work and be placed on the page. If there is no strong preference, software requirements and usability should dictate how navigation should be configured.

Drawing wireframes

Wireframes should include:

- **Key page elements & location:** header, footer, navigation, content objects, branding elements
- **Grouping:** side bar, navigation bar, content area, etc.
- **Labeling:** page title, navigation links, headings to content objects

How many wireframes should I create? As many as you need to get the job done. Minimally you will need:

- Homepage
- Major sub-pages and "portal" pages
- Pages with forms
- Search results page & 404 Error pages (optional)
- Any other pages that provide clarification to the overall development process

Presenting wireframes

Always present a simplified version of the wireframe, not including too much content which may derail/distract the client. There are a number of formats you can use for the test:

- **Printouts:** By far the easiest method. Print, show, get feedback. Great for on-the-spot feedback, and easy to make notes on.
- **Hand sketched wireframes:** Printouts can intimidate clients and sometime it is helpful to just trace the wireframe as a sketch. This way the client see the sketch as a work in progress and will be open to providing more candid feedback. Plus you can simplify the wireframe during tracing to show elements you want to focus on.
- **Visio:** There is a feature in Visio (and OmniGraffle) that allows you to create actual links within a wireframe then export the whole set as a HTML site. This is useful in testing such elements as navigation across multiple pages.
- **HTML prototypes:** Same as Visio above.

Many clients have never seen a wireframe and the most common client reaction to a full wireframe is that they are “overwhelming” or “cluttered”. This is only natural since they lack much of the visual organization that comes later during graphic design.

- If you are in a presentation meeting with many stakeholders that are seeing the wireframes for the first time, ask around to get a sense of how many people have never seen a wireframe before
- Give a brief introduction about what wireframes are, and how they should be read
- Remind the meeting attendees that wireframes show only content and layout (and are missing graphic treatment) and that “it is not what the site is actually going to look like”. Too many people think that this is what the site is going to look like.

http://www.strangesystems.net/archives/2005/03/using_wireframe.php

Resources & Reading

Site Redesign Case Study http://www.digital-web.com/articles/redesigning_the_expressionengine_site/

More Info On Site Maps http://www.gdoss.com/web_info/web-site-map.php

More Info On Wireframes http://www.gdoss.com/web_info/web-site-wireframe.php

Wire Frame Your Site <http://www.sitepoint.com/article/wire-frame-your-site>

Extensive Information Architecture Process http://www.gdoss.com/web_info/information_architecture_deliverables.php



