

Review

Luke Wroblewski (2008). *Web form design. Filling in the blanks*. Brooklyn, NY: Roosenfeld Media | ISBN 1-933820-24-1

Forms are a text genre in which integration of good writing and good graphical design is of paramount importance. Many studies have taught us which factors affect the effectiveness and ease of form use, both from the perspective of form fillers and from the perspective of organizations that use forms to obtain information (cf. Jansen & Steehouder 1999). However, the mushrooming of web forms in the past decade has raised new challenges for researchers and designers.

Regrettably, only little research has been published about the effects of the many new design options offered by electronic forms. And, apart from some eclectic web sites, cohesive advisory books about the topic are few and far between. *Web form design* is one of the first, and the author has certainly succeeded in offering us a useful and informative book with an eye-catching design to boot.

The focus in the book is on the interface and interaction design of web forms, rather than the underlying programming techniques. So there is no talk about content management systems, data bases or programming. Neither does the author pay attention to complicated organizational issues such as authorization, privacy and safety of data transfer. Instead, the author pays attention to usability and user experience.



Steehouder, M. (2009). Review: Web form design. Filling in the blanks. *Journal of Writing Research*, 1 (2), 177-179

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After the introduction, the author discusses 12 aspects of form design in 12 chapters, organized in four sections: the *organization* of forms, the *elements* of the form (such as labels, input fields, and help texts), and *interactive* aspects (such as inline validation). A closing chapter speculates on the future of forms, arguing that the genre will probably disappear, while game-like methods will be introduced to obtain the information an organization requires from its clients.

The typical content of a chapter consists of a discussion about the design issue at stake, amply provided with examples taken from a wide variety of web sites. Most chapters include intermezzos in which experts from the field give their perspectives. Each chapter ends with a list of guidelines (do's and don'ts) under the heading *Best practices*. This variation of rubrics, examples, and the pleasant 'story telling' approach of the author make *Web form design* a pleasant read.

While reading most chapters, I realized how little we really know about good design of web forms, and how difficult it is to provide guidelines that go beyond 'common sense' or vagueness. Many extracts in the book contain lively and intriguing exposures of the questions and the dilemmas of the writer/designer, but they often fob us off. For instance, after discussing whether a list of questions should be presented on a single web page or in a series of pages with one topic per page, the author concludes (p.28):

"The answer, of course, is ... it depends. But we can get a better answer by understanding the context for each form we design. Who is filling the form in and why? Answering this up front allows us to think about our forms as a deliberate conversation with a specific person instead of the inputs for a database".

This all may be true, but it does not really answer the question nor does it help the designer to make a decision. Many 'best practices' at the end of the chapters are equally vague.

Another observation is that much of the advice could also have been given to the designers of paper forms. The book does not pay too much extra attention to specific features that can be used to enhance the usability and the user experience of web forms. It would be worthwhile to describe how user profiling techniques help to create customized or adaptive web forms. With such techniques it is possible to reduce the number of questions to only those data that are not yet known to the organization. They also allow us to adapt the grouping and the order of the questions to the specific circumstances or the preferences of the users. For instance, users can decide themselves whether the explanation of the questions is displayed left, right, above or below the questions, or in a separate help file. Web forms also enable all kinds of data transitions (for instance calculations).

Finally, it struck me that the author does not refer frequently to empirical research that could support his advice. Relevant research is not abundant, but there is some

available in studies of Form Design, Human Computer Interaction, Usability Studies and Multimedia. It would be a great challenge to bring all this research together and apply it to web forms. With all my appreciation for the book as it is, I could not suppress my desire for a book that would offer all these extras.

References

Jansen, C., & Steehouder, M. (1999). How research can lead to better government forms. In D. Janssen & R. Neutelings (Eds). *Reading and writing public documents* (pp. 11-36). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

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