

Try the trunk test

Now that you have a feeling for all of the moving parts, you're ready to try my acid test for good Web navigation. Here's how it goes:

Imagine that you've been blindfolded and locked in the trunk of a car, then driven around for a while and dumped on a page somewhere deep in the bowels of a Web site. If the page is well designed, when your vision clears you should be able to answer these questions without hesitation:

- › What site is this? (Site ID)
- › What page am I on? (Page name)
- › What are the major sections of this site? (Sections)
- › What are my options at this level? (Local navigation)
- › Where am I in the scheme of things? ("You are here" indicators)
- › How can I search?

Why the *Goodfellas* motif? Because it's so easy to forget that the Web experience is often more like being shanghaied than following a garden path. When you're designing pages, it's tempting to think that people will reach them by starting at the Home page and following the nice, neat paths you've laid out. But the reality is that we're often dropped down in the middle of a site with no idea where we are because we've followed a link from a search engine or from another site, and we've never seen this site's navigation scheme before.

And the blindfold? You want your vision to be slightly blurry, because the true test isn't whether you can figure it out given enough time and close scrutiny. The standard needs to be that these elements pop off the page so clearly that it doesn't matter whether you're looking closely or not. You want to be relying solely on the overall appearance of things, not the details.²¹

²¹ Tom Tullis of Fidelity Investments did an ingenious experiment along the same lines to evaluate the effectiveness of different page templates. He populated each template with nonsense text and asked people to identify the various elements like the page title and the site-wide navigation simply by their appearance.

Here's how you perform the trunk test:

Step 1 Choose a page anywhere in the site at random, and print it.

Step 2 Hold it at arm's length or squint so you can't really study it closely.

Step 3 As quickly as possible, try to find and circle each item in the list below.
(You won't find all of the items on every page.)

Here's one to show you how it's done.

- CIRCLE:**
- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Site ID | 4. Local navigation |
| 2. Page name | 5. "You are here" indicator(s) |
| 3. Sections and subsections | 6. Search |

The screenshot shows the latimes.com homepage. Red circles highlight the following elements:

- Site ID:** The URL latimes.com in the top left.
- Search:** The search bar at the top.
- Sections:** The main navigation menu on the left, including News, Politics, Entertainment, Music, Movies, Art, TV, Restaurants, Travel, Classifieds, Jobs, Homes, and Cars/Rentals.
- Page name:** The main headline "Breaking News" in the center.
- Local navigation:** The "TOP STORIES" section on the left, listing items like "Nuclear Lab Computers Limit Access", "Helms Has Congresswomen Removed", "Armenian Premier Killed In Parliament Shooting", "Three Americans Kidnapped in Yemen", and "Gore, Bradley Square Off In First Debate".

Other visible elements include the date "WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 1999", the "Print this story" link, and various news snippets on the right side of the page.

Now try it yourself on the four web pages below. Then compare your answers with mine, starting on page 92.

And when you've finished, try the same exercise on a dozen random pages from different sites. It's a great way to develop your own sense of what works and what doesn't.

1

Quicken.com Home Investing Mortgage Insurance Taxes Banking Retirement Shopping Small Business

Retirement Home 401(k) IRAs Planning Annuities Wills & Estates Boards

Annuities Step by Step

Annuities Home

Intro
What is an annuity?

Step 1
Fund other plans first

Step 2
Is an annuity right for you?

Step 3
Compare annuities to funds

Step 4

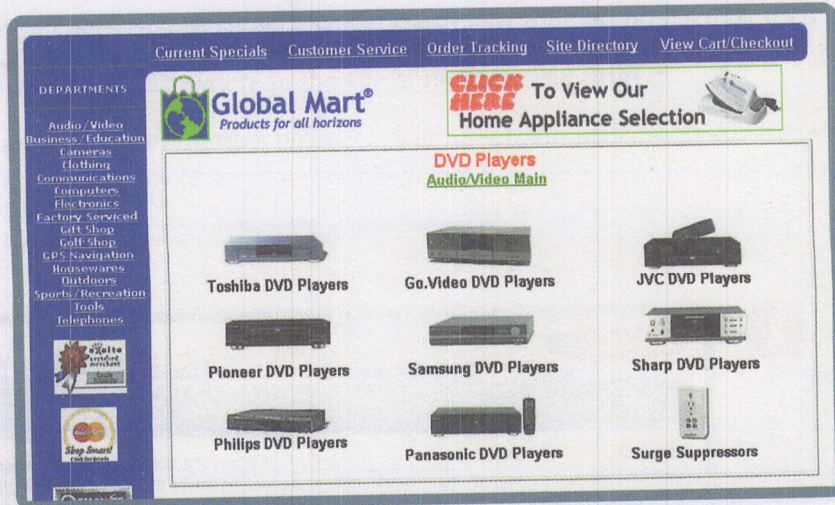
Before thinking about annuities, fully fund the tax-deductible and tax-deferred savings plans (other than annuities) that you're qualified to take part in. Individual- and employer-sponsored plans are great ways to squirrel away money for the post-work years. They're more effective than annuities because they usually have lower fees and most give you a bigger break on taxes. For example, both a 401(k)'s principal and earnings grow tax-deferred, whereas only an annuity's earnings do so. Also, most plans give you a wide variety of investment options.

The following chart shows contribution limits, advantages, and other comparison points for the different plans.

Retirement Plans At A Glance			
Plan	Sponsor	Annual Contribution Limit	Advantages
401(k)	Corporations with more than 25 employees	Maximum employee contribution is \$10,000	You choose how to allocate your investments

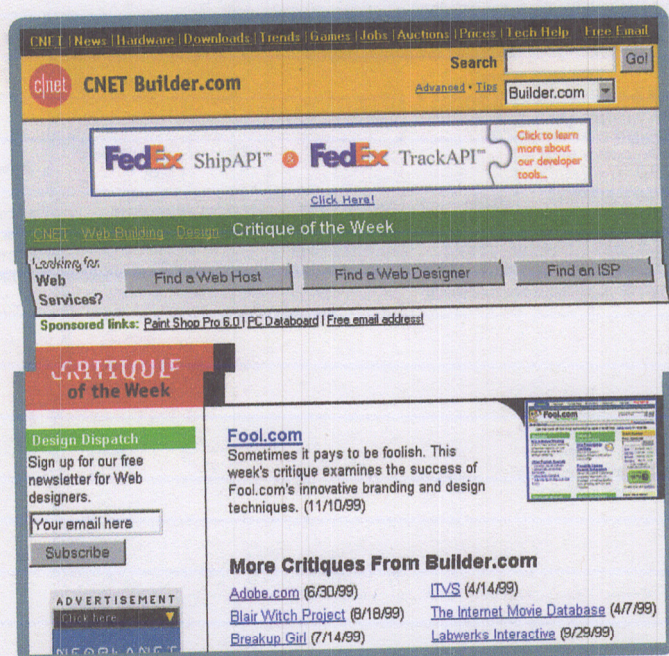
Answers on page 92

2



Answers on page 93

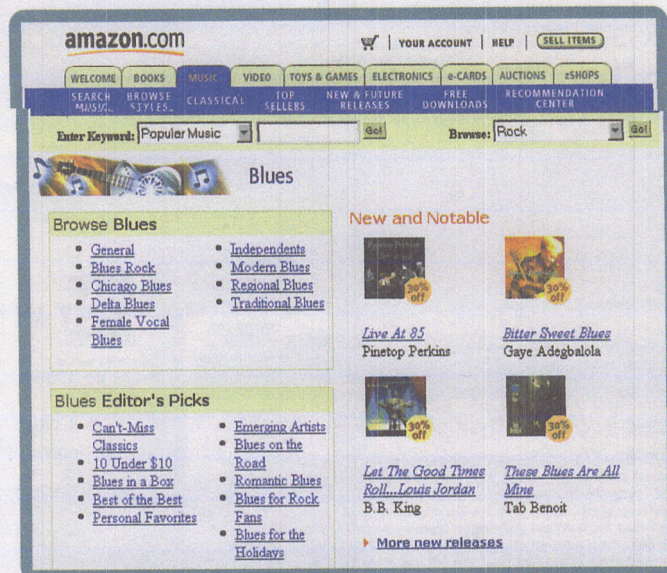
3



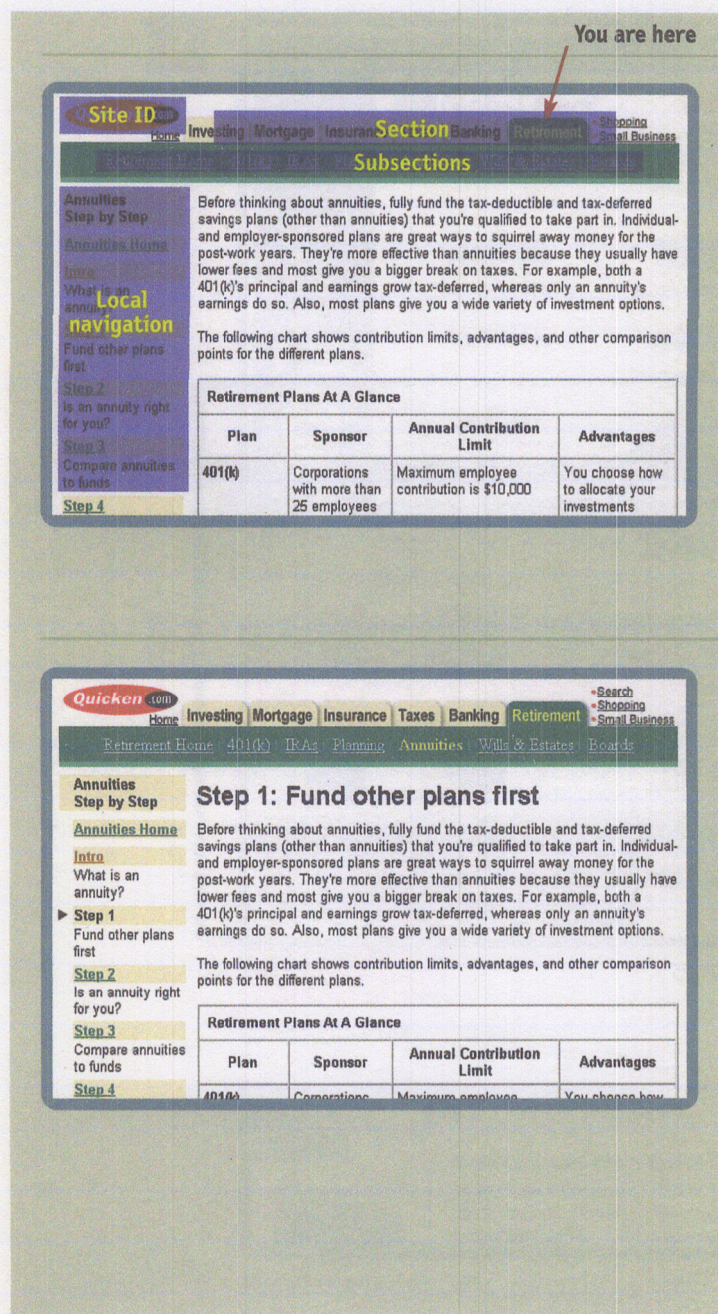
Answers on page 94

STREET SIGNS AND BREADCRUMBS

4



Answers on page 95



WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

"Annuities Step by Step" looks like the page name, but it's not.

The page name is actually "Fund other plans first," but you wouldn't know it because (a) there's no page name, and (b) there's no "You are here" indicator in the list on the left.

And there's no search box or search button, which is amazing for a site as large and varied (and full of useful content) as Quicken.com.

< MY VERSION

I've added...

- > A page name at the top of the content space,
- > A "You are here" indicator in the list on the left, and
- > A search link, in the Utilities list.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

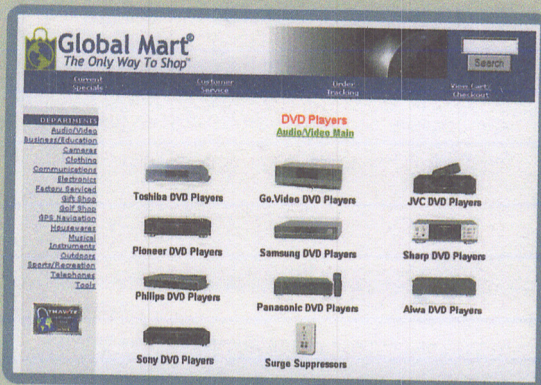
The Site ID is below the navigation, and hard to spot. It looks too much like the internal promo next to it, and because the Site ID isn't in the upper left corner, it ends up looking like an ad.

The heading DVD is positioned above the link Audio/Video Main, but it is lower in the hierarchy. And there's no search, which is baffling in a large e-commerce site full of products.

< THEIR REVISED VERSION

While I was writing this chapter, Global Mart redesigned their site and did most of the right things themselves. For instance, they moved the Site ID to the top of the page and added a search box.

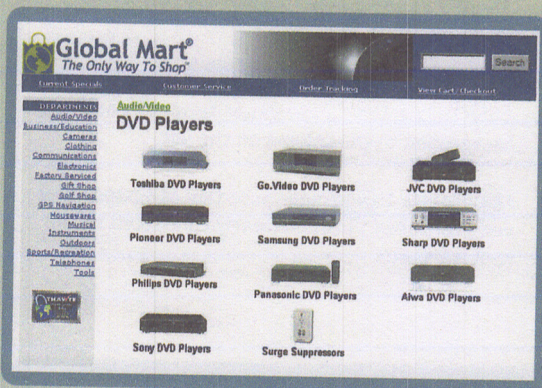
But as so often happens with redesigns, for every step forward there's one step back. For instance, the Utilities went from one legible line to two illegible ones. (Always avoid stacking underlined text links; they're very hard to read.)

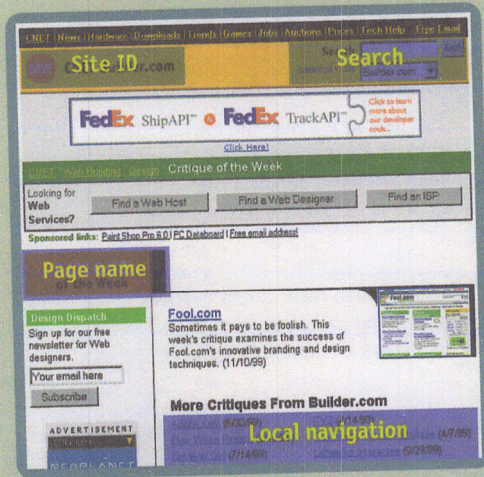


< MY VERSION

I moved the link to Audio/Video above the page name, so the visual hierarchy matches the logical hierarchy. I also made the page name a little more prominent, and moved it flush left instead of centered. (In most cases, I find left or right alignment is more effective than centering in "telegraphing" a visual hierarchy.)

For the same reason, I moved the search button next to the search box, instead of centered below it.





WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

The navigation is spread out all over the page, making it much harder to tell what's navigation and what isn't. The navigation, ads, promos, and content all run together.

There is no list of major sections. The list at the top looks like sections, but it's actually a list of other sub-sites of CNET.com. What makes it particularly confusing is that Builder.com (the site I'm in) doesn't appear in that list.

The only navigation that tells me where I am in Builder.com is the Breadcrumbs.

It's also hard to tell where the content actually starts. This is one of those pages that seems to keep starting over, forcing you to scroll down just to find out what it is.

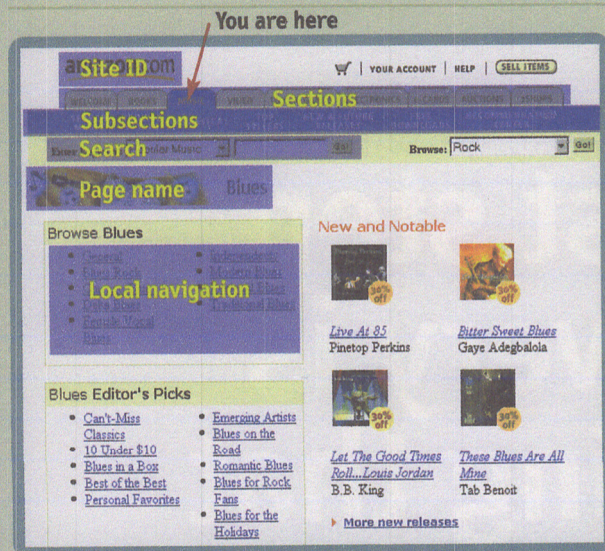


< MY VERSION

This is one of those pages where you have to give up the gumption to say, "This is beyond tweaking." There are underlying dilemmas here that need to be resolved before you even think about the page layout.

All I did was tighten up the top a little and try to make the content space easier to spot by adding a background to the column on the left.

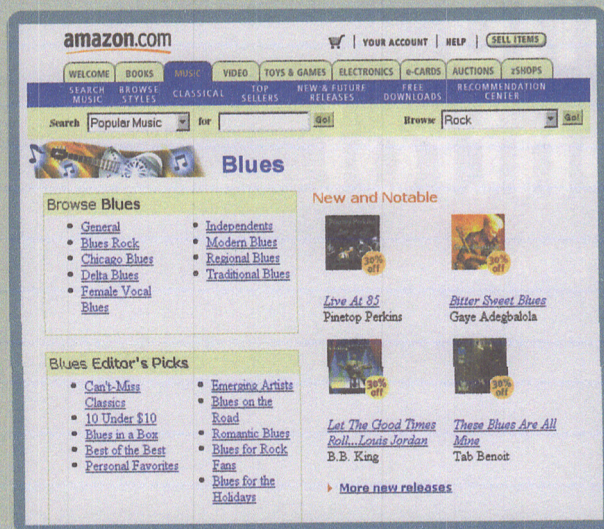
At the same time, I made sure that the page name was positioned so it was clearly connected to the content space.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

Not much. Did you have trouble finding anything?

I rest my case.



< MY VERSION

There's really almost nothing to improve here.

I did redo the search. (I don't know why they used "Enter Keywords" here when they use just plain "Search" almost everywhere else in the site.)

And if you're going to scope a search, it's always worth adding the word "for" so it reads like a sentence: "Search ___ for ___"

I also made the page name a little more prominent to help make the division between the content and navigation spaces even clearer.