

Sound ideas for the future of the Internet

Julian Treasure

Sound is coming to the Internet and it could be a major competitive differentiator for those who use it well.

How can we be so confident that the Web will find its voice? Cinemas started silent then developed low-bandwidth analogue sound on small speakers. Then there was the exciting discovery of stereo sound through big speakers, then Dolby 5.1 and full-scale sound design. This journey from silent to low-fi to hi-fi to surround applies equally to home music systems, TV, radio, PCs, in-car entertainment, handhelds - you can plot where each technology is today on the curve.

Today's Internet is largely silent, with a minority of low-fi sites and a handful of hi-fi pathfinders. The reasons for this - low bandwidth, clunky players and tiny loudspeakers - are largely historical. Now that broadband and Flash have achieved critical mass and home computers nestle among multi-speaker setups, so most Web sites browsed at home are already missing a trick by ignoring the power of sound. And for business users, whether in the office or on the move, Bluetooth and stereo headsets already allow them to enjoy Web sound without bothering those around them.

Businesses that sell sound (or products that make a sound) can reap immediate benefits from Web audio, so these tend to be the sites that lead the way - Amazon invented risk-free music buying by offering track samples.

But for any site, sound can be a potent parallel information stream, as well as making the site friendlier, more personal, more fun and more accessible.

However you use sound, there are three key rules for ensuring a positive user experience:

:: Make it optional Have obvious sound controls. If you stream audio on opening your home page, give aural instructions for sound control. Never impose audio that carries on streaming after your Web site is closed.

:: Make it appropriate Consider the audience and the material on the page when you select a sound. Conform to audio brand guidelines if they exist. Differentiate between ambient and topical sound.

:: Add value Don't use sound just for the sake of it.

If improved user experiences and increased sales aren't reason enough, then how about survival? We believe that within a decade sound will replace keyboards and screens as the primary input/output medium for all of our devices. From our work systems to our home information/entertainment systems to our personal terminals, we'll store, manage and access digital information by talking and listening.

So a Web site that's mute will become invisible. This is sound business in every sense.

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