

web doctor www.merlynbathrooms.com

In a series of virtual health checks, web doctor monitors the pulse of one company's online offering. This month, it's Merlyn Bathrooms – so what's the diagnosis?



Reviewing Merlyn's sumptuous upscale online creation was something of a revelation, not the least because it rejuvenates a style of navigation, scrolling, that for some time had been as popular as Alesha Dixon's first outing as a Strictly judge.

Similarly, that arbiter of taste, Apple, recently and highly controversially overhauled its colossal iTunes software, adding multi-scrolling techniques throughout. Vertical and horizontal scrollbars litter the white-dominated application, but thankfully Merlyn's outing will prove to be less divisive.

Its home page is a forward-thinking example of how best to lay out wares, but still challenge expectations to keep us visitors on our toes. More Anton Du Beke than John Sergeant.

At the top of the page lies a white-on-black text dropdown menu, but once the sensible stuff is over and done with, the fun begins. A spinning

carousel of product ranges whizz in place, just begging for us to chase them with our mouse and find out more. So far so quirky.

Rather than overloading the first screen of content, otherwise known as above the fold in a nod to newspapers, Merlyn then leads visitors to scroll downwards, introducing new offerings and core products with short introductions and well-chosen images. If you reach the bottom, you are rewarded with thumbnails of the main product zones to get you on your way further into the site.

No place like home

It's always refreshing when designers take a risk on the landing page, mainly because no other stage is as critical. The home page as a concept started out life as the site that loaded when you first launched your browser, but has morphed to signify the contents section of all

web sites. It's no coincidence that it is a term that has warm and fuzzy connotations, but the science of getting this prime real estate right is hard-edged and ruthless. Dorothy may have taken three clicks of her heels to get home, but by necessity it is to be the only page on your site that always takes one, because nothing works as hard on your behalf.

There are other reasons Merlyn should be applauded: it rightly fights the temptation to welcome visitors to their platform. This is one old school trend that is blissfully on the wane, and harks back to a time when we really did deserve congratulations for nudging our recalcitrant modems to arrive anywhere at all before falling over in a heap. Nowadays such salutations are better used as tag lines, and the rest of this square footage above the fold kept to making a concrete statement as to what the site is for and why we should stay put.

Having encouraged visitors to move downwards, the adapted design for internal content is then free to spread itself about. A good test for the usefulness of product pages is whether the most important data and graphics fit neatly on an A4 page. No prizes for guessing whether Merlyn achieve this feat.

Another nice bit of fancy footwork worth noting is the use of thumbnail or mini images to draw focus to the main sections. Done well, as in this case, these are never the large pictures that set the mood, such as the glamorous roomset that greets the eye on entering, but rather zooms in on a detail. Close-ups work as icons or signposts and tell the story much more efficiently.

What Merlyn's site reminds us is that hard and fast rules of what is 'good' or 'bad' design is an outdated concept, and unlike at the Beeb, a blast from the past is always welcome.



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matki.co.uk

Matki Showering

Four main sections and an arresting home page make up Matki's well set out and dapper Flash-heavy site designed around a central box grid

Top marks Logos are used to highlight Matki's charitable efforts, guarantees and approvals, but are assigned a bottom of the page position so they don't draw focus from the main event. Logos are often vital but should normally take a back seat to the task ahead, in this case, admiring the goods

Works well A useful twist on the Find a Stockist page, Matki allows visitors to search by town, stockist and range, as well as postcode, acknowledging that consumers will reach out further for what they desire

Could do better With so much back-end to load, there is something of a lag for even the fastest broadband connection to get into the site

Suggestion box The collections are organised superbly, allowing you to either click directly to your destination or browse in a leisurely fashion, however a section reserved for only the newest products wouldn't go amiss

Attraction factor A multi-layered success ★★★★★



lakesbathrooms.co.uk

Lakes Bathrooms

So far so standard with this white and blue layout, but there's loads of highly usable elements here such as text links and embedded content

Top marks To publicise Lakes' water-repelling AllClear coating, visitors can watch a self-contained movie, and even request a sample wipe via a quick form

Works well Now that's clever! Having filled in the free sample form, the site remembers the settings when I attempt to request a brochure. A time-saving extra that shows forethought

Could do better August 2008 seems to have been a busy time according to the news page, but only one update since then gives off a whiff of neglect

Suggestion box Where pdfs are used, such as installation instructions, it's best to flag up that a new page will open and a download is beginning

Attraction factor Creates a confident vibe. Four out of five ★★★★★



daryl-showers.co.uk

Kohler Daryl Ltd

Quick to load and even quicker to get to the point

Top marks The 'Choose by' menu relies on simple line drawing icons to describe the various types, perfect for those who aren't au fait with industry terms such as in-swing and fold-in

Works well It's always worth investing a little extra time in a site map as detailed as Daryl's, not just for lost souls, but with added keywords, it will boost search engine hits immeasurably

Could do better When using Safari as a browser, the Contact menu box shifts from its rightful place on the far right, to below Shower Enclosures on the left, getting in the way of the dropdown menu

Suggestion box 'See this product on display' leads consumers to showrooms but would it better titled something punchier like 'See it for real!'

Attraction factor Calmly professional. Four out of five ★★★★★



showerluxdesigna.com

Showerlux Ltd

Its products are heralded here as modern art forms, which could be said of this 'out of the box' site that throws away the rule book once and for all

Top marks Who could fail to be charmed by the 80s-inspired graphics that usher in the main text, emerging on a slant from all angles in a funky typographic design? **Works well** Despite the heavy reliance on Flash technology, load times are minimal and text kept to a few hard-hitting words that can be quickly scanned to get the overall gist in no time

Could do better I struggled to find a 'take home' such as a downloadable spec sheet or brochure, which may be mundane, but win out on usefulness

Suggestion box A small arrow logo to indicate the need to scroll down is almost too missable – time for a rogue colour to be thrown in the make it easier to see?

Attraction factor Surprising, quirky and original. Four out of five ★★★★★



teuco.co.uk

Teuco

Teuco has gone out of its way to avoid providing a glut of information, or recreating its brochures. Instead it is all about the look and feel

Top marks Rather than clutter its darkly sensual layout with downloads, the main pages link through to corporate holding pages with the everyday stuff such as specs and measurements

Works well Consistently high-end product images are the mainstay of the message, and with crisp and lush artwork like this, why ever not?

Could do better The basement jazz that accompanies the Flash show reel got on not only my nerves, but also those around me and finding the off button was hard

Suggestion box As this is a .co.uk URL, why not lose the language options and reserve them for main corporate sites?

Attraction factor Impressively besuited – like a stern Versace doorman on Bond Street. Three out of five ★★



roman-showers.com

Roman Showers

This portal is a beast – jam-packed with videos, news, support and care information. Everything but the kitchen sink in fact

Top marks Understanding cross-pollination, there's banners for Roman at Home in prominent spots

Works well Consumer and trade customers are well-provided for with support documents

Could do better Link rot strikes again – the downloads page refuses to appear, and the FAQ's (sic) are not there yet, but this could be a temporary problem due to updating activities at HQ

Suggestion box The content is impressive, but would this destination benefit from some judicious section rationalisation, creating less main landing pages to hold the less popular pages? Or even the addition of a horizontal menu?

Attraction factor No stone is left unturned. Three out of five ★★



aqualux.co.uk

Aqualux.co.uk

Dropdown menus also feature handy thumbnail pictures, a refreshing design trick that will certainly be copied in the near future

Top marks Acknowledging the growing use of social networking sites for organising favourite sites, etc, there's a link that lets visitors bookmark the site to their Facebook et al pages

Works well Without fail, every section highlights a telephone number and email for sales enquiries, never forgetting what these pages are really designed for

Could do better A home page overrun with text, images, banners and logos creates a chaotic impression that is unfair to this otherwise easily navigated site

Suggestion box The 'save and email this page' function buttons would perhaps be more effective and less distracting as low-key graphics

Attraction factor Bright and breezy. Three out of five ★★



simpsons-enclosures.co.uk

Simpsons Enclosures

Simpsons have created a sympathetic design that ties well in with the other Crosswater online brands

Top marks Background images behind the navigation area are often the cause of eyestrain, but the subtle grey-on-black wallpaper in TEN adds a touch of luxe

Works well The lifetime guarantee graphic is a key element that holds the home page together stylistically and also from a customer service viewpoint

Could do better There's some browser compatibility issues, meaning a few elements don't show up on every platform. Easy to fix though

Suggestion box As the file sizes for brochure downloads are quite large, is it possible to offer divided up versions from the product pages?

Attraction factor Consistency is key here. Landing on any of the brands will reassure visitors with the grown-up use of the marquee. Three out of five ★★



aqata.co.uk

Aqata

All the elements are there, but measly text and a too-polite sales push means this site lacks marketing magic

Top marks An online brochure utilises the currently hot page-turning technology that displays the print version in all its glories and allows for printing and downloading to boot

Works well Contact pages work hard to provide several access points, and the general vibe is of supreme politeness. Aqata even thanks visitors for coming

Could do better 'Skip Intro' are the first words displayed, but is this really the message to convey? The debate about splash screens rolls on and on...

Suggestion box Centered grids offer greater visibility, so why not shift the content holder away from the left-hand side? A small change that will improve usability of mobile platforms

Attraction factor Soon to be replaced? Two out of five ★★

web watch shower enclosures

Have these manufacturers displayed a sparkingly clear shopfront, or are things getting a bit murky on the web?



First past the post...

The colourway may be grey on grey, but the overall effect is far from it. Matki's restrained layout relies heavily on dropdown menus to restrict the number of section categories to a highly manageable four. While some visitors will zoom straight to the collection they want, the main landing page for the collections gives a snapshot view of all ranges and their key elements, using image rollovers to display a short text introduction. It's this kind of clear signposting that ensures that those not in the know can navigate their way around.