

Creating and Maintaining the Dynamic Diagrams Web Site

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DYNAMIC DIAGRAMS, INC.

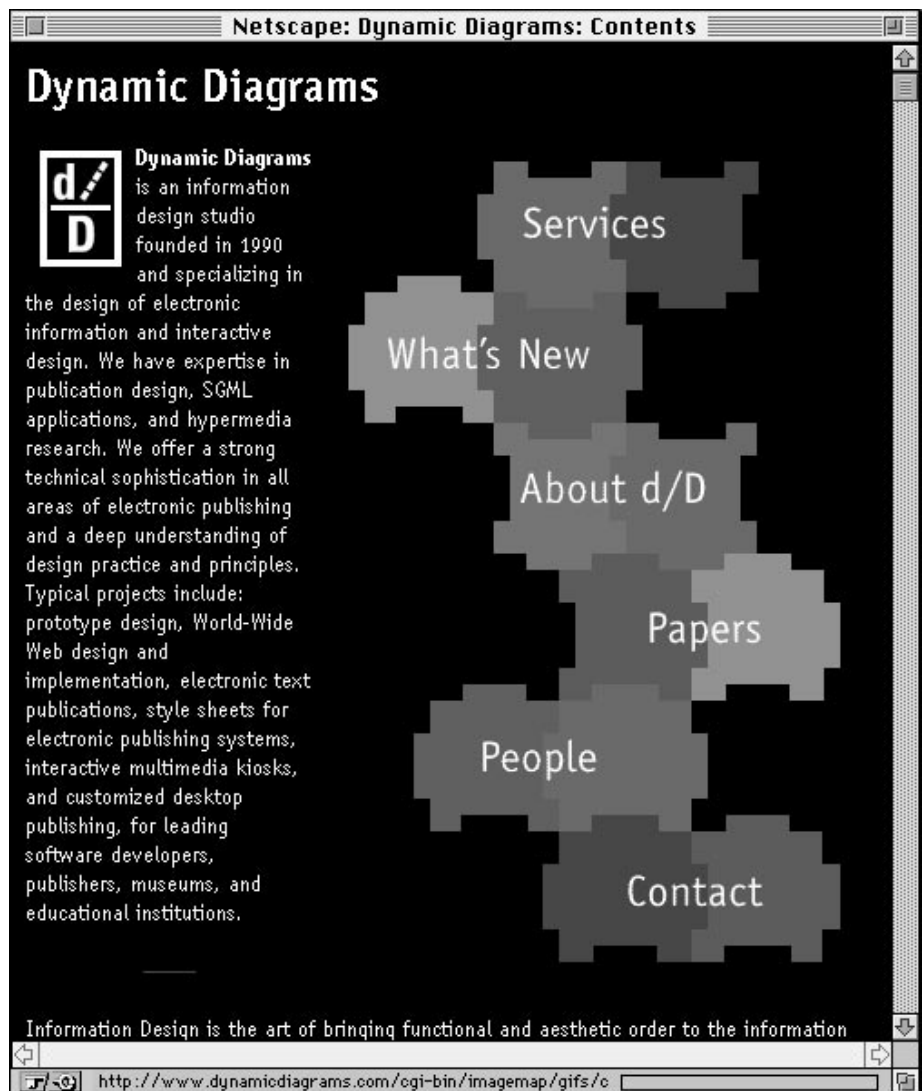
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Dynamic Diagrams is an information design studio. Since our founding in 1990, we have devoted most of our energy toward the presentation of electronic information on the computer screen. Our company grew out of the challenge of presenting linked collections of text and graphics to a general audience. We have been designing for and implementing complex hypertext networks in many forms. When we first came across the World-Wide Web in 1994 we were already familiar with its basic concept. We designed the first web site for a client in August of that year, when the number of commercial sites on the Internet could be counted in the dozens.

By the summer of 1995 this situation had changed dramatically. We were designing web sites for many customers. The amount of time, energy, and press being devoted to browsing web sites was enormous. Creating our own web site became a natural extension of the work we were doing.

We also knew we had to define the function of our site to make it successful. The primary function of our web site was to deliver marketing materials to our prospective clients. We had gone to great expense to print a marketing brochure the previous year. This information was now old, there were many new projects we wanted to show our prospective clients, and nearly all of it was best viewed on the computer screen itself. So we set out to complement and

Figure 1
This six-part, high-level structure is presented in a contents page and repeated on the bottom of each page on the site.



ultimately replace our printed brochure with a more comprehensive and up-to-date presentation of who we are and what we do. We quickly found that most of our potential clients had access to our web site. This allowed us to use the web site in “real time” when discussing potential projects with these clients. We could send them electronic mail containing URLs of pages to look at, or simply tell them during phone conversations where to look and what to look at. We could even put together new pages that described and illustrated projects to support specific discussions with clients located anywhere on the planet, as long as they had access to a web browser.

At the same time our site is a public place, accessible to anyone browsing the web. We wanted to design it in such a way that anyone finding it would see immediately who we are, what we do, and how they might use our services. To accomplish this we focused on three things: creating a clear navigational structure, devising ways to integrate interesting visual examples of our work, and finding ways to publicize the existence of our web site.

We organized our material into six chapters: Services, What’s New, About d/D, Papers, People, and Contact. This high-level structure was presented in a contents page and repeated on the bottom of each page on the site. The Services section was where 80% of our content resided. This was further subdivided into six service areas: World-Wide Web Design, Interactive Publications and Prototypes, User Interface Design, Information Design, Technical and Production Services, and Seminars and Workshops. A summary of example projects were put together for each service area, with each linked to more detailed

Figure 2
Dynamic Diagrams put together small, interactive examples in the form of QuickTime movies, QuickTime VR, Director animations, Acrobat documents, and 24-bit JPEG images, and distributed these throughout the services section.



examples of specific projects. This allowed visitors to quickly see a range of images from several projects and then choose to see greater detail for a particular one.

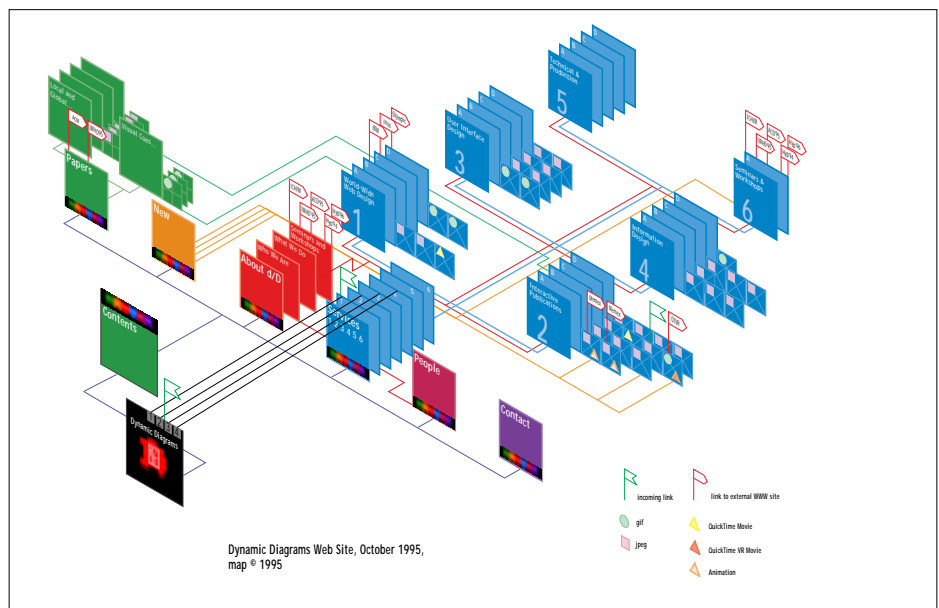
While the six chapter organization was a clear representation of who we are in general, it did not suit our marketing needs in particular. We also wanted to provide fast access from our “welcome” page to specific information about our most popular services. The resulting “welcome” page leads easily to the contents page as well as the other chapter pages, but also features short-cuts directly into descriptions of four of our services.

Integrating interesting examples of interactive work on a web site is a constant challenge. The quality of images and the level of interaction possible on web browsers in the summer and fall of 1995 was far lower than the other forms of computer design we were engaged in. At the same time the limits of web browsers are changing rapidly. However, making use of every new Netscape extension does not result in good web design. We put together small interactive examples in the form of QuickTime movies, QuickTime VR, Director animations, Acrobat documents, and 24-bit JPEG images, and seeded these throughout the Services section. We hope that giving away these examples would make visiting the site attractive. It also helped to cut down on our distribution overhead. Before putting up our web site we often mailed out sets of diskettes containing interactive samples. Now we could simply refer people to the page on the web site where they could download an animation in the format appropriate for their computer.

The most direct way to let people know what we had to offer on the web involved registering our site with the organizations that index information on the web. We also sought out individuals and organizations that maintained list of interesting web sites on specific topics and let them know what we had to offer. As a result of publicizing our work on “The Mongolian Felt Tent,” an interactive kiosk created for the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, we found links to our pages from sites interested in Mongolian culture throughout North America and Asia. Our involvement in various design and computer conferences also resulted in links from conference sites to our “welcome” page.

Figure 3

Dynamic Diagrams created maps to represent hypertext collections as a way of communicating the otherwise invisible structure of electronic information.



Adding a link from a credit line on a client's web site to our own site, with the client's permission, has also generated significant traffic.

We began creating maps to represent hypertext collections as a means of communicating the otherwise invisible structure of electronic information. We adapted these maps to the task of planning web sites for our clients. A clear visual representation of what they had in mind proved to be an excellent tool for writing and organizing the materials that go into a company's web site. We finally got around to mapping our own site many months after it was created. The result was too large for a clear presentation on a single web page, but the free distribution of Acrobat Reader by Adobe offered a solution. We created a PDF version of the map that could be quickly downloaded from the contents page. The map has proven to be a popular feature. We are currently working on ways to implement a similar map that can be created programmatically from information about a web site's structure.

We wanted to use color on our web site in a straight forward and effective manner. We developed a graphic language based on interlocking puzzle pieces, each with a solid warm, bright color. We took advantage of the Netscape extension that allowed us to specify the color of background, text, and link text on each page. The color of the puzzle pieces was chosen to contrast strongly with a black background. All text was set in white, with the link text set in gold and red. We chose these colors to provide some variety and contrast from the more common grays and whites used on most web pages.

We also found that one of the advantages of maintaining your own web site (as opposed to renting space for a few web pages from an Internet services provider) is access to the usage information gathered by the web server programs. A public web site offers immediate and accurate feedback about how often it is being visited, who is visiting, and what they are looking at. With a small amount of programming we were able to generate daily reports showing activity on the site, the probably home page of each visitor, and a list of all things downloaded. This gives us an accurate idea of what parts of the site have proven to be most popular, as well as where people are coming from. By asking incoming traffic to report the location they are coming from we are also able to see how they are getting to our site. This lets us know when people have added links to our site from their own web pages. It also gives us lists of search terms visitors have used at search sites such as Lycos and InfoSeek that resulted in visits to our site.