




Art and

A Much Needed Sym

BY AHMED EL-WAKIL



With the advent of the internet, all respectable businesses now have a web-site allowing internet users to find out about a company and the services that they offer. The layout of the site, and the way the information is displayed can make all the difference. Web-sites can now provide users with an interactive experience, and include built-in presentations and animations so that potential customers can better understand the products and services available. This is even more important when it comes to companies that have an online presence or rely on advertising as their main source of revenue. A clear and well defined site is therefore crucial.

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But where should you go to have your site designed? It is not uncommon to find ads and companies offering very cheap prices, but what does that entail? To find out more, CIO Arabia had the opportunity to talk with two companies, Design Co-ordinators Interactive and 3i Systems Solutions, and see what they had to say.

Meet the Artist

A truly professional designer must have a combination of things, and creative director Fadia Badrawi is no exception to the rule. An Egyptian with American experience, Badrawi is a graphic and web-designer with a unique edge: she is first and foremost an artist. Having received her K-12 education from Cairo American College in Egypt and then Wellesley College in Boston for undergraduate studies, Badrawi majored in Art History and Studio Art and planned on working as a full time artist. Her love of art was apparent from a very young age. "They used to call me Miss Xerox", she recalls "because when I was younger I used to draw from pictures and replicate all the fine details on paper. I liked human faces, and I used to draw portraits in pencil. When people would look at my drawings, their reaction would be 'Oh my God, it looks identical to the original'". In high school and college Badrawi also drew cartoon strips for the newspaper. Although she defines herself as "a very classic traditional artist", Badrawi has experimented and mastered a number of styles. "I started with a very realistic kind of style", she says, "then I moved away from that to more impressionistic painting and I started playing with colors and light. Art has always been 'my thing', and now I do everything, from realistic to abstract. I'm definitely versatile". (See the artist's portfolio - website: www.fadiabadrawi.com).

Fadia Badrawi, Creative Director, Design Co-ordinators Interactive



The company Badrawi works for, Design Co-ordinators, is based in Egypt and started out as a Graphic Design company in 1993. "In 2001 I saw there was a potential for web-design here in Egypt," recounts Badrawi. "The only companies offering web-design at the time were the

ISPs (Internet Service Providers) rather than the advertising agencies or graphic design companies". After teaching herself all the essential web-design programs, she was all set to offer web design and multimedia services. What makes her background quite unique is that she can easily answer the needs of her clients. To come up with high quality designs, Badrawi sometimes uses a tablet to draw freehand directly into the computer. "It is important to make things appear realistic, even if it's something as simple as a button" she tells us. "If you want to have a 3d effect or you want the light in a certain way, you need to know how to physically draw it to look real". And this is exactly the point! Let us for a minute assume that you own a stable, and you want to have an animated presentation

to teach kids how to ride a horse. If the person you delegate for the job cannot draw horses, then you have a bit of problem. What you may end up with are scary creatures from outer space swamping your presentation rather than nicely drawn horses! So having someone who is able to draw absolutely anything is an added bonus – the only limit to answering such demands, as Badrawi puts it, is "time".

Being Creative

This combination of art and technology seems to be quite rare in the Middle East. As Badrawi herself puts it: "You have to be technical and have an artistic background. I've had problems here in Egypt finding people who have both. You can find lots of talented artistic people, but unfortunately they don't know the technical part". This view is also shared by Amr Sadek, a business developer with 3i Systems Solutions, a multimedia company based in Riyadh. Having a wide ranging experience with web design and development, as well as designers for approximately the past 10 years, Sadek believes that there is a real shortage of creative designers. "Creative people are rare" he says, "especially in this region". It is more difficult to find a good designer than to find a good developer" he tells us. "On top of that, if the client wants to pay as little money as possible, he will get a low cost production with no creative output. A site at a low cost is nothing more than a series of edited ready-made templates". It is therefore not uncommon for low cost designers to subscribe to web-site template providers, the likes of Boxed Art (www.boxedart.com) and Template Monster (www.templatemonster.com) and select from a wide variety of sample sites which are then edited. For instance, you may be a company selling herbal products. Once you log on to one of those template providers, you will be able to select from a variety of sample designs. You may for instance find a number of pleasant designs with pictures of herbs with well laid-out menu bars, and of overall high quality. If you are a small company or maybe even a medium sized company, this may be acceptable. However, just like most things in life, there's always a catch.

Firstly, the customization that takes place on the downloaded templates may ruin the overall look and feel of the site. "You may need to add certain menu bars or even change certain pictures," says Sadek, "and these must fit in with the rest of the site's look and feel. If they don't, then the design will suffer. A design may have a particular picture or style to give it a certain impression. Such an impression may not last after customization. The question therefore often comes down to this: does the chosen template fit in with the logo, colors, images and site map that would answer the client's needs? And this of course cannot always be guaranteed". Although Sadek's point may only ring too true, having a template based site may have an even more damaging effect, and this leads us to our second point: lack of uniqueness. Going back to our example of a company selling herbal products, unless the herbs that you are selling are illegal, rest assured you will not be the only one on the market selling these products. If a good number of your herbal competitors have subscribed with a template provider, chances are

that at least one of your competitors has downloaded the same template as you have and edited it. "If two companies download the same template" says Sadek "it will be obvious to the end user that they originate from the same source".

The fact that templates do exist should lead us to be slightly wary of what tends to be on offer. This is something that may not be obvious to companies when they see the finished product. How would they know that the people they hired used a template and just modified it? But as Sadek points out, experienced web-designers would know the difference. "I asked a person who wanted to work for us to send me some samples" he recalls. "As soon as I received them I could tell them for what they were. Having a well designed site reflects the company's image. This is why a reputable web-design company such as ours could never provide their clients with templates". A job well done therefore has its price. "If someone has an artistic background, generally they have an 'out of the box' attitude" says Badrawi, "so what happens is that you get a site that is more original, has a message and a different way of presenting things. That's good because you want to stand out from just making the page look pretty or just making the page functional or technically correct. It goes the extra mile. You have an edge when it comes to creativity,



"Return from the River" - artwork by Fadia Badrawi

visual layout and when it comes to the way someone clicks on a page, as you have a better understanding of where the eye goes. When you paint a painting you always think of composition, diagonals - you always read a painting in a certain way depending on the color, the balance, the symmetry and so on, and when you translate this to websites, it translates into usability".

Amr Sadek, Business Developer, 3i Systems Solutions



According to Amr Sadek, his whole design team has a strong background in the arts. "Clients pay for the creative idea" he tells us. "50% of the cost is for the creative idea". An artist must also possess original ideas to come up with truly creative designs. "Out of being an artist myself, I have received jobs that are artistic in nature" says Badrawi. "I did a website for an art gallery that needed a way to present the paintings in their exhibits. Because their gallery was built by an architect who had made arched entrances, I decided to design the page itself with arches so you get an immediate sense of the location. Instead of just putting paintings in a row, the latter were arranged in the same way as though you were physically there at the gallery. This gives you an indication of how someone with an artistic background can more easily translate what it is like to be in a gallery."

But why do we have such a lack of creative designers? In the US and Europe, they do not face this problem, and professional agencies would always have web designers with an artistic background. It is possible to be a designer and not be able to draw - but this means that you would have to rely on other people's illustrations, or as we've discussed, use templates and then manipulate them. Not exactly the best way to go about having a snazzy site! "Because entry into web-design is very easy, everybody thinks he can be a web designer, but that's not the case" says Badrawi. "They think that the only hindrance is the software. If they learn the software, they will be fine. That in itself is a huge problem".

Perhaps one of the answers comes down to colleges and universities in the region not providing an in-depth design curriculum. "If you graduate in the US from a design school, you are prepared to work," explains Badrawi. "You have studied design. The curricu-

lum includes drawing and color theory classes. Then you would move to graphic design basics. I think that this is lacking in Egypt and the Middle East. One of my dreams someday and to give back something to our society would be to open a local graphic design school!"

Outsourcing

It is not uncommon today to have companies outsource their work abroad, especially to India. Badrawi herself has done some work for companies located outside Egypt. "Most of my clients are local but I have some who are foreign" she tells us. "I have a client – an investment bank that is located both in the US and here. Their headquarters are in New York, but they have offices here and in Japan. It was obviously more cost effective for them to have us design and produce their site than if they had done it in the US or Japan. I've also dealt with multinationals - the likes of 5 star hotel chains - that have their head offices in the US and Europe".

"Outsourcing hasn't been a problem for us" adds Badrawi. "After an initial first meeting it becomes very much e-mail and telephone. Although it is nice to meet because you actually get a feel of the person and what they want, I have nonetheless done work where I haven't met the client at all. I have a client in Libya who wanted to re-design his site. I never actually talked to him over the phone, it was all e-mail. I provided him with the design and he was happy. The only time you need physical items from the client would be if they need to send things on CD, like Auto-CAD drawings or a product catalogue or a hard copy of an annual report. But even now, over e-mail, you can send 20 MB without a problem using FTP".

The option to outsource is also a very attractive one when you consider the pricing. "A website that would cost \$5,000 in the US would cost 5,000 Egyptian pounds. For the same kind of work and standards, we're basically a fifth of the price if you compare Egyptian pounds to dollars" explains Badrawi. But although her company, Design Co-ordinators, has had no problems with outsourcing, Amr Sadek would nonetheless disagree. "There are a number of problems with outsourcing" he tells us. "The obvious one comes down to internet fraud. How do I know that once I pay I will get what I want? What if I am dissatisfied with the product? When you are local there is a pending agreement with the client. He makes a down payment, and if he is dissatisfied we can alter the design. If with time he wants to add things to his site or wants to alter certain aspects of it, we can provide the support. This is by no means guaranteed if the work is outsourced". The other obvious advantage to going local comes down to improved communication links. "I always find it much easier to sit down with the client" says Sadek, "that way you get a very clear idea of what he wants".

Apart from payment and legal issues, with perhaps at times some communication problems, there can also be a technical downside to outsourcing. "If I ask someone in India to design my site, how will they deal with the Arabic text?" Sadek points out. Obviously this affects content, and according to Badrawi, it is not uncommon to find companies faltering in that respect. "The English can be

very poorly written here, or say in India" she says, "you may have unnecessary ramblings or the grammar may be very bad. That's for the English side, but for the Arabic I think it should be better as it is our native language here". Being a native English speaker herself, Badrawi doesn't have that problem when it comes to editing her work. A company like 3i Systems Solutions however, to maintain its professional standards, relies on competent copywriters and editors when doing an English version of a site.



"Bedouin" - oil painting
by Fadia Badrawi

So there you have it. We've covered some of the problems you may face when designing your company's new site. Visual content and composition may be lacking if there is no artistic background, and you have to be careful that language is up to scratch - all of which, if compromised, may affect your professional image!

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