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# FLASH *FORWARD*

**Toronto web agency Pixelcarve weighs in on creating content and looks to set the record straight on some of the more prevalent myths about Flash.**

By Yvan Marston

Jeremy Choi, Ryan Priest and Curtis Priest in the lobby of their Spadina Avenue offices.

KING WEST CENTRAL, TORONTO / -“Look at this. ‘Can’t use the back button. Can’t index it on Google. Can’t manage the content. Can’t cut and paste out of it...’” Ryan Priest’s voice trails off, irritated by the blog he’s quoting that chronicles the supposed failings of Flash web software.

“But all that has been fixed,” he says. The post is recent, but the blogger’s information is outdated.

In partnership with his cousin Curtis Priest and colleague Jeremy Choi, Ryan is part of a trio that forms the executive of boutique web agency Pixelcarve.

From its 2,000-square-foot loft space at King and Spadina, the trio and its team create premium web sites and online ad campaigns for high end brands like interior designers Yabu Pushelberg, Avenue Road furniture, Sine NY clothing and Paramount Home Entertainment, and they do it using mainly Flash, a browser-based multimedia platform that adds animation, video and a fluid type of interactivity to a web page.

“HTML is great for information-based sites,” explains Choi, the firm’s COO, “but if you want to build a brand experience, you use Flash.”

“That’s what we focus on: Helping brands to look good

online,” he adds. Given the creative possibilities offered by Flash, the office must at times double as a photo studio where the team shoots stills and video to help bring their site concepts to life.

But Flash has been battling a misinformation campaign, in part due to Apple CEO Steve Jobs’ April announcement that iTouch, iPad and iPhone browsers would not support Flash-based web content – this despite the fact that Flash is used on close to 85% of all web sites, many of which are built entirely in it.

“It essentially amounts to a war between Apple and Adobe [makers of Flash], says Curtis, the firm’s president, adding that since Pixelcarve is keenly interested in new media technologies, especially the use of rich media, “We have a stake in the outcome of this war.”

And whether that proves a challenge or an opportunity is a matter of perspective.

Twelve years ago, Curtis and Ryan Priest saw another sea-change in the web. The two-dimensional, HTML-based experience that web sites were offering was going to give way to a richer, more graphically immersive experience. And they wanted to be a part of that change.

“We wanted to work with clients that asked: How can you change my company by creating an online experience?”

— Curtis Priest



TOP: Building content for a pilot digital menu board project for Harvey's Restaurants (Cara Foods) put Pixelcarve in the 'visual experience' business. Other work includes the creation of premium websites for brands like Luxe Destination Weddings (MIDDLE) and Gillette Fusion ProGlide (ABOVE).

“I went to school for 3-D, so I wanted to incorporate more 3-D graphical elements into the web,” says Ryan, the chief creative officer, “and with Curtis’s web site building and video production skills and my 3-D skills that’s where we wanted to start changing how people perceived the web.”

As Curtis was starting his web consulting business, Ryan was working for a Bay Street law firm that needed a web site designed. It was the first job completed by the partnership and led to another law firm site – but this time they were given more creative latitude. They pitched a site featuring animated elevator doors opening to a virtual lobby where users could browse graphic elements to find information on the firm.

When it was complete, the site garnered a lot of attention from Toronto’s legal community and sealed Pixelcarve’s reputation as an innovative web design firm.

“In the beginning we just followed the money,” says Curtis, explaining that they started out working mostly for companies that saw web sites as a necessary marketing cost.

“But we wanted to work with clients that asked: How can you change my company by creating an online experience? Companies that understood that if their virtual storefront was beautiful, unique and elicited an emotional response then it becomes a business tool that will attract and retain their target clients,” he says, adding that this perspective moved the company from two guys working in their respective suburban basements to becoming a downtown supplier to large ad agencies and recognized international brands.

Well, that, and the capital from a lucrative contract creating interactive training systems for Harvey’s and Swiss Chalet restaurants across Canada for Cara Foods, as well as content for a pilot digital menu board project. Working for Sweda, the technology firm that invented the electronic cash register, Pixelcarve created the visual experience that would become the content for the menu boards.

Whether on a media board, a computer screen or a mobile device, the idea for the content and how it will work is part of the production savvy the trio brings to each of its client projects. And regardless of how good it may look and feel, they are always careful to ensure it functions as it should: easy to search for and easy to navigate. That’s in part how Choi came to join the team. In 2008, he found himself subcontracting Flash work to Pixelcarve and the latter subcontracting HTML, search engine optimization and mobile component work to Choi’s firm. Acquiring Choi’s team and technologies, and making him an equal partner simplified things.

Now, mobile is demanding a lot of attention as the trio works to sort out the limits of small screens and lack of standardization.

“The future is definitely about mobile right now,” opines Choi, “but that doesn’t mean the web is dying. Mobile is just another way to view the Internet.”

“It’s all about inspiring people to interact with the content so that something interesting happens on screen,” adds Ryan. “Then they engage with the brand and it creates a memorable and positive experience.” ■

*pixelcarve.com*