

Gestalt Considerations in Search Box Location and Design

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Gestalt principles are rules of the basic understanding of the perception of patterns (Ware, 2000). They describe how different physical relationships (proximity, connectedness, similarity, closure, etc.) of things result in our perception of patterns. These principles are fundamentals of good design practice and are often taught in the introductory classes. Although some of these principles seem simple and obvious, these principles are not always diligently applied to many interface designs. Advanced application of Gestalt principles requires a very good knowledge of design and understanding of the user. Even then, even the most obvious may remain hidden to a designer who is intimately involved in a design and sometimes it takes user intervention to look at a design with fresh eyes.

As a case study, consider the search box of a web page. Common design patterns suggest a search box should always be in the top right corner of a design (Shaikh & Lenz 2006). This convention is so deeply rooted with some designers that they will place the search box in this location regardless of implications to the rest of the design. In many ways this is justified, current user information suggests that users will look to the top right corner of a web page for search before any other location (however this does not suggest that other locations would not be noticed or as usable).

If the search box will not fit in the top right corner of a design (sometimes reserved for banners, advertisements, or utility navigation), it is often moved lower on the design to the left of right side and very close to the page content. This is a popular location for multi-column website layouts, including weblogs, which use side columns as primary or secondary navigation. The location itself is not necessarily the problem, but the visual representation and graphical treatment which result in basic violations of the Gestalt principles of proximity and closure.

On my personal weblog (Paul, 2006), you will see the search box in this alternate position. Additionally you can see that the designers of this template¹ included the label/directions “search blog archives” in the search box. Now examine the rest of the site and the design elements relative to the search box. The top header is a very dark color and the page background is gray while the rest of the content, including the search box, section tab, and supplementary navigation, has a white background. The use of tabs are often perceived as a method to silo information (information which is mutually exclusive and not inter-linked). Without the aid of search box label/directions, would you as a user know if this search was contextual (only searching the current section or page) or global (searching the entire site).

Examining the design devices used in the context of Gestalt principles, it is easy to see how this search box could be perceived as contextual. It is very close to the content and (if you navigate deeper in a section) very close to the secondary navigation. The contrast of the white content area with the dark header and gray background provides a sense of closure to anything located in the white area implying context. The addition of section headers only strengthen the perception of context because it in a way it labels everything in the section, including the search box.

The search on this site, and other sites suffering from similar Gestalt principle violations, would be better served to have the search location better designed. Moving the search to outside

¹ The designer is not the author, it is a pre-made template.

the content area would be one design alternative. Separating the right navigation column from the content by a background color or separator line is another possible design alternative. After analysis, this type of design mistake may seem obvious however typical even in good designs. It reinforces the importance of good understanding of Gestalt principles and their proper application in interface design.

References:

Shaikh, A. and Lenz, K. (2006). Where's the Search? Re-examining User Expectations of Web Objects. Usability News, Vol. 8 Issue 1.

Paul, C. (2006). Personal weblog. <http://weblog.obso1337.org>

Ware, C. (2000). Information Visualization. Chapter 6. Morgan Kaufman Publishers. pp. 203-221.