

Great Web strategy – pity about the usability

The easiest way of improving the effectiveness of a Web site is to improve its usability – a message that most companies ignore. Dick Stroud explains.

About the Author: Dick Stroud is a CIM training course director, specialising in Internet marketing. He also teaches at the London Business School. His consultancy helps companies use technology to improve their marketing effectiveness. He can be contacted at dick@internet-strategies.co.uk

I was recently interviewing the directors of a leading UK professional services company to research how they viewed their company's Web site. I received lots of comments about "it has a nice look and feel" and even more profound views about its "pleasing colour and appearance". Worryingly there was a total absence of any views about the experience of using the site and whether it was satisfying customers' requirements.

This example illustrates a more general and disturbing point. Companies spend much time and effort in defining their Web strategy, their Web site's visual aesthetics and the content it contains. Rarely is the same energy and enthusiasm given to ensuring that those who use the site can get what they want in the simplest and quickest manner. It is totally wrong to believe that an attractive engaging site is also going to be simple to use and hence effective from the perspective of the customer.

Web site usability ranks very low on the list of disciplines of most Web marketers. Hopefully this article will ensure that it is taken more seriously and seen as a means of gaining additional business rather than a costly and boring chore.

There are numerous definitions of 'usability' and most of them are couched in nebulous words like efficiency, effectiveness, satisfaction, environments and experiences. A more useful definition could be 'the practice of being focused on ensuring that every icon, every word and every part of how a Web site works is intuitive and helps make the customer's visit as simple and pleasurable as possible'. Steve Krug, who is a leading exponent of usability, titled his book on the subject 'Don't make me think'. Unfortunately most of the Web sites I visit make me think far too much! I wonder what the words describing the navigation mean and I become lost in a sea of different navigation options. Having become totally frustrated in trying to find the information I want and completely baffled as to why things don't appear to deliver what they promise, I am then unsure of how to get back to where I started. Put bluntly, lots of sites look good but are a nightmare to use.

So why is usability so important? If users of a Web site cannot get what they want, in a very short space of time, they will either stop looking or go somewhere else and probably not return. I am amazed why this most basic of lessons is regularly overlooked. We all experience the frustrations of using Web sites that are difficult to use but rarely apply this same critical appraisal when analysing our own sites.

U-consulting, a major UK usability consultancy, has recently conducted a research exercise that provides some compelling evidence to show why a Web site's usability is so important. The study considered the reasons why people abandon a Web site during the process of making a purchase. Research from Bizrate.com shows this is a very common occurrence, with 75% of Internet users abandoning a shopping transaction.

U-Consulting's research divides the reasons why people leave a site before completing a shopping transaction into three categories.

Catastrophic errors (i.e. Those things that invariably lead to a person leaving the site)
Unable to find the right product owing to limitations of the search process
Frustrated and annoyed at the need to re-enter data to complete the transaction.
Irritated by the slow performance of the site when processing the different stages in the transactions
Confusion when trying to browse the product catalogue (i.e. not being able to select by price, supplier, availability etc)
Major errors (i.e. Problems that lead to frustration and the regular abandonment of the shopping basket)
Illogical and confusing layout of the instructions for making the purchase.
Ambiguity of language (i.e. Not explaining exactly what is required of the customer)
Missing features (e.g. address choices, delivery options, printable versions of important forms)
Serious errors (i.e. Errors that are annoying to the site visitor and can lead to them leaving the site)
Illegible type and unrecognisable links
Wasted time in negotiating the site. This is a particular problem when the site has a 'Flash' introduction
An illogical and confusing progression through the different stages of the purchase

U-Consulting believes that rectifying these mistakes can produce a 50% increase in the number of successfully completed transactions.

This is an astonishing. You spend the majority of your marketing efforts and resources in getting individuals to the point where they want to make a purchase only to see 50% of the business disappear because of poor Web site usability. It is no different to supermarket seeing 50% of its customers walking around their store and then returning their empty baskets to the checkout with a high likelihood that they will never return.

So what can you do to start rectifying this problem? There are no instant solutions but here are a few practical steps you can take.

Ensure that all parts of your company's Web site operations really understand the importance of ensuring good usability. Often the most serious usability problems occur in the transaction processing part of the site and this may be the responsibility of IT rather than marketing. It is essential that this group is fully committed to producing software that it is easy for the customer to use. In today's jargon this would be called making the software 'customer-centric'.

Understand that good Web site usability is not a one-time task, it is a way of life. As sites develop, the original navigation hierarchy can become confused and lead to the user having a poor experience. Regularly check the site's usability and when necessary make the necessary changes to get it re-focused around the customer. This is likely to require an increase in the budget for the

maintenance of the Web site but this should be funded by an increase in the conversion of prospects to customers.

Correct problems created by the use of ‘company jargon’ and by making false assumptions about users’ knowledge and understanding. It is very difficult for anybody who has spent the briefest time in a company and become immersed in its language and jargon to understand why this may be totally confusing to a stranger. Critical parts of a site’s navigation must be tested by an audience comprised of people outside the company.

Monitor the number of technical changes that may create problems for customers in accessing different parts of your site. Increasingly PC users are using firewall software and modifying their browsers’ security and privacy controls. There are multiple versions of Microsoft and other supplier’s browsers and each has numerous versions of software ‘patches’. For all of these reasons it is vital to keep reviewing your site with the same browser configurations used by your customers. This is a chore but a very necessary one. A major UK on-line bank recently upgraded its Web site but failed to check how it would work with certain combinations of firewall and Microsoft browser. The result was it crashed certain versions of browsers, mine included, whenever the site was accessed.

Ask users for feedback and then act upon it. Either through feedback facilities on your Web site or through off-line focus groups it is possible to get high quality feedback about the site’s ease of use. What so often happens is that this research is collected and then is either ignored or diluted by the views of individuals from within the company.

Ensuring good Web site usability is part science and part art. It demands that you have an excellent understanding of how the visitors to your site behave and what they want to achieve. It demands you understand the technical reasons why sites can fail, why the use of language is so important and why screen layout must be matched to how people think and act.

The most important point is that you and your management are committed to providing outstanding usability. For those that get it right the rewards can be considerable. For those that don’t the reward will be a Web site that might satisfy the company’s management and its Web designers, but it will be money wasted and it will frustrate the hell out of the customers.

At a Glance

- ➔ A good web strategy and attractive Web site does not mean it will be successful from the customers’ perspective.
- ➔ Many Web sites look great but remain a nightmare to use
- ➔ The capability of a Web site to generate business can be increased by up to 50% if the main usability problems are solved
- ➔ There are ten main reasons why customers abandon their purchase transactions
- ➔ It is vital that all parts of the organisation understand the importance of usability, in particular IT specialists. It is not just a ‘marketing thing’
- ➔ Ensuring excellent usability is not a one time task but must become part of an organisation’s culture.