

Usability vs. Brand Reality

by Alice O'Brien

Did you know that many of today's large commercial web sites fail to meet user usability needs? In fact, in a study of nine major commercial web sites, only 42% of visitors are able to complete their intended reason for going to the site. This means that 58% of use DO NOT manage to find what they are looking for or make a purchase!¹

Just recently, Zona Research found that 62% of shoppers on major consumer web sites gave up looking for what they wanted to buy. Even more recently, Forrester Research released results that indicated that 64% of the B2B sites they studied did not receive a passing usability grade.

This is the bad news but there is hope.

While today only 24% of major web sites conduct serious usability testing, usability is now being recognized as an essential element of web site development. When budgets are allocated, there is a line item for usability study and testing. Smart businesses will not allow hard-earned profits or potential clients to go down the drain of a poorly designed site. Owners do not just take the word of the designer as gold... they take the study of real users and proven software to the bank.

So is usability just something to test or can we eliminate most of the pitfalls through intelligent and experienced development?

Well if web design and personal taste were a science then Yes. If the web site is talking to the target group that matches your web designer then Yes. However, in most cases these are not true so... no. No amount of study or debate can be substituted for real user testing. Still, there are basic principles and best practice guides for usability that can be applied and give benefit to test users.

Improving user experience can increase both customer satisfaction and revenue while lowering costs. To maximize return on their design investment, companies should model user scenarios, identify barriers to success, and target high impact fixes.

User first

Is that 15-second Flash intro getting in the way of your site's usability? Only diehard fans watch reruns of TV shows. Why would anyone want to waste his or her time watching your FLASH intro more than once?

Yes it tells your company's story exactly the way you want it told but most people will only watch it once... if you're lucky. This type of content is only about you and your company; it rarely serves the customer in their quest on your site. Give the user all the tools to enjoy their trip to your site. So put the advertising somewhere on your site where those people who are interested can find it... don't place it as a roadblock to everyone.

Contrary to common wisdom, user-centered design is not a process, but a philosophy. User-centered design requires the inclusion of a product's end-users throughout the design process.

¹ Jared Spool, author & usability expert - *User Interface Engineering*



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The primary benefit of user-centered design is that, when performed well, it ensures that the product is useful, usable, and meaningful to the end-user.
So ask the question. "Is my site focused on my users?"

Best Practices

In general, there are usability hazards and benefits on any site. Hazards hinder the user's ability to accomplish what they set out to do. Benefits go beyond the baseline for usability standards. Hazards should be the first in line for site improvement but remember that eventually today's benefits would become part of those everyday standards – best practices.

Does good usability mean that I have to give up Interactivity?

Not at all. In fact, in general good usability generally means increased interactivity because it means the site easy for the user to understand what he or she can do on your site. FLASH rich applications with the ease of in-page rollovers can increase usability and interactivity enormously.

Links: Use lots of links. What's intuitive to you may be unclear to me, so give your users plenty of opportunity to find the right link. Don't be afraid to put the same link more than once on the same page.

Content: People are looking for information – your content. Content is King; it's what the internet delivers best. Users are less likely to find content when they don't see links to it on the main page. Thus, the main page should show 80-90% of what a user is looking for. No, I don't mean that the page should scroll on for days. Well-constructed architecture can provide easy reference and access paths to content down many layers. Make it easy to complete your most common scenarios from the main page. Large "look & feel" images should not take all the space when needed for other information.

Layout: If the user doesn't need "it" to find what they're looking for, see if the page still works without it. It = extraneous graphics. Sometimes designers try so hard to keep the same look & feel as applied in other collateral that they don't see how certain elements actually hinder site navigation.

Color: It effects how we see what's on the page. The most confusing use of color is between words colored for effect (bold) and words that are actual links. While usability standards say the links should be blue, this is guideline can be adjusted to meet the design standards of a site.

Always accompany color used for navigation purposes with text. 10% of the population has trouble with color blindness so color alone is not sufficient.

Latest & Greatest: If your users are 20 year olds who don't hesitate to adopt new technology then you have little to fear from using untested technology. However, if like most sites you expect a wide variety of users, using the latest plug-in is not necessarily a good idea. The same can be said for some HTML code that is not accepted by older browser versions. Set your acceptance parameters at the outset of any web design or update project.

Download Speed: In Canada especially, more and more users have high-speed connections. But not everyone does. Don't forget that large files will take a long time to download for users on 56K or slower modems. One third of users out there today still use these modems. If pages



take more than 10 seconds to load... you've already lost their interest or you better deliver them GOLD.

Status information (where the user is on your site) should always appear and in the same place on every page. You may understand the color codes, the image codes, the tones of other navigation clues but nothing is as clear to EVERYONE as a status bar. Let them know where they are and how they got there.

Ergonomics

No, it I'm not talking about whether or not the user is sitting in a comfortable chair but rather the ease-of-use and comfort of moving around a web site.

Fitt's Law: The time to acquire a target is a function of the distance to and size of the target.

Which of the following takes less time? Heating water in a microwave for one minute and ten seconds or heating it for one minute and eleven seconds?

From the standpoint of the microwave, one minute and ten seconds is the obviously correct answer. From the standpoint of the user of the microwave, one minute and eleven seconds is faster. Why? Because in the first case, the user must press the one key twice, then visually locate the zero key, move the finger into place over it, and press it once. In the second case, the user just presses the same key—the one key—three times. It typically takes more than one second to acquire the zero key. Hence, the water is heated faster when it is "cooked" longer.

Getting things done with the fewest of clicks will improve the user experience and make them appreciate your site as one that delivers. Obviously carefully planned and studied navigation is the major source of ergonomic efficiency.

Conclusion

Testing your site with real live members of your target group or groups can save your site from delivering a poor user and a brand eroding experience. Write scenarios that you would expect them to use, ensure that anything you hope to "push" is extremely easy to use and doesn't hinder any of the most common user goals.

When it comes time to measure the ROI of your site launched without user testing the answer can all too easily be in the red. Not just in monies expended but in erosion of your brand equity. Reworking a site after the launch can be done but will add more than just negative numbers...

- Users who managed to find their way around your site will not be happy to find it changed (even for the better);
- Users who were frustrated with your site will not come back;
- You may have missed making a sale;
- You will have eroded your brand equity;
- The programmers and designers will have to rework your site at additional cost (time and expenditure).

Ask these questions before you start:

- Who are your target users?
- What will they want to do on your site? What are their goals?
- How can you help them accomplish goals?

