

Internet Usability

How often have you been confronted by a commercial website and not been sure what the company is actually selling? Then when you've tried to find more information about the company or its products or services, you have been presented with a confusing navigational structure, which more often than not leads to a dead end, rather than to any information which you really wanted?

This probably happens to you a great deal as there are many commercial sites on the Internet which are badly designed and have very 'poor' usability.

A Gartner report (2001) says, "For e-commerce and e-CRM usability and user experience aren't the most important things, they may be the ONLY things!

So what is Usability?

The British Standard defines it as "The extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a specified context of use". In other words, if a website has been designed with high usability, its users will find its navigation easy to use, it will have a common-sense or intuitive approach and there will apparently be little complexity. If the design is right the experience can actually be enjoyable.

So how do we design-in Usability and why is it really important?

Many companies spend a significant amount of time and money on attractive graphics and animation. They may employ, either directly or indirectly, expensive, highly qualified designers who have achieved accolades for their work. However, graphics alone do not improve the usability of a site, and on occasion complicated graphics and animations can distract the user from the task in hand. Attractive graphics are not

the answer; the key is in the understanding of the needs of your end-user.

To take an example from history, a major leap forward in the field of consumerism was the development of the VCR. From the early, heady days of Betamax, videodisc and VHS, to today's disposable machines with Nicam stereo, these have been one of the major consumer product successes. Many households now own more than one. However, how usable is the product? The primary objective of the VCR was to record television programmes in advance. However, after years of product development and the introduction of 'Video Plus' technology, there is still a significant percentage of the population who use their VCR to play videos, and to record TV "in real-time", i.e. by pressing the record button when the programme starts

It could of course be argued that a lack of usability has not damaged the sales of these items but the reality is, that in the industry, the usability of these is seen as a benchmark of poor usability!

Designing-in Usability is achieved by understanding your end-users needs

Strange as it might seem this understanding does not come from listening to users. It is about watching them - observing what they do. If you ask a user what they did or how they used an interface, their reporting of the task will often be unreliable and coloured by what they think you will want to hear. A good example of this comes from an American research organisation who was asked to find out what people watched during the afternoon. The people reported that they normally watched wildlife documentaries and news programmes, but when the researchers secretly filmed them, they were watching soaps and hosted talk shows about relationship problems.

If you need to compare one design with another or to 'test' a design independently, observe users as they attempt to complete tasks. In controlled experiments there is still a risk of biased behavior

but many different techniques can be employed to gather the data.

The researcher has both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess usability. The research does not always need to involve extensive samples. Some excellent work has been done with just 10 to 20 users. The secret is to use an iterative approach, with user testing after each iteration.

Another factor to understand with Internet use is time. Users will not spend long on a page trying to understand its content or where they should 'click' next. Ideally the page should download quickly and a quick scan of its contents should tell the user what the page is about and where to click for further information, which leads us onto layout.

Regular users of the Internet come to expect functions to be in particular positions, the company logo at the top left, search at the top right and common links to the side of the main body. Designers often want to 'stretch the envelope' or 'break with tradition', but if this leads to confused and frustrated users then it is not good for commercial sites.

This is all very well but why is it important to design-in Usability?

Well it's really simple, if you want people to use an Internet site and to come back to it time and time again, then make the experience both useful and pleasant. The model is completely different to that of the VCR, where all offerings are similar and changing to another if you are not happy with the usability is time consuming and difficult. On the Internet there are many vendors of similar products and services and access to them is very simple. A good example of this can be seen by typing "digital camera sales" into a search engine, Google for example, returns 28,500 entries!

So on the Internet if a user attempts to use a site and finds it difficult, within seconds they can try another. The site they will stop on will be the first one they find which is easy and simple to use with the information they want.

So are there some special techniques to ensure high usability?

We have found that a combination of 'User Centred Design', (taking an iterative approach to design with users consulted at each iteration), coupled with 'User Needs Analysis' (which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the needs, behaviours and feelings of users) gives us a Usability process which works.

This is validated by comments from our internal and external BT customers extorting the value in business terms, of using this approach.

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For more information on the techniques and approach outlined either contact the author at

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