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Making the Internet work for you



It's likely that all of us have visited a commercial website only to leave it after some time, still unsure as to what it was offering. Even more frustrating is a website with a confusing navigational structure that leads us to a dead-end, rather than the information we wanted. Jeff Patmore, head of Internet and multimedia design and solutions at BTextact Technologies, advises that building in usability from the outset can radically improve the user experience.

Many commercial websites on the Internet are badly designed and have poor usability. This sits very much at odds with a Gartner report published in 2001¹ which states: "For e-commerce and e-CRM, usability and user experience aren't the most important things, they may be the only things!" So, if the design is right, the user's experience can - and should - be an enjoyable one, leading to the destination in a commonsense and intuitive way and with minimal complexity.

If you want as many people as possible to visit your website - and revisit it regularly - then it is important to make the experience useful and rewarding. On today's Internet, anyone that finds your site complicated and difficult can simply visit an alternative within seconds. For example, some companies spend a lot of time and money putting attractive graphics and animation on their websites. But graphics alone do not improve the usability of a site and over-complicated graphics can even distract the user from the task in hand. Poorly designed, graphics just slow the download of pages and further detract from the usability of the site.

Time is of the essence to any Internet user. None of us wants to spend a long time finding a page, reading it and understanding its content or working out where to click next. So, ideally, any web page should download quickly, and a scan of its contents should tell the user where to go next. Here, layout is a key point. Most internet users have now come to expect functions to be in particular positions on a web page, with the company logo at the top left, search button at the top right and links to the left of the main body of text. And if that is what people expect - why change it?

The key to good website design is in understanding the needs and objectives of your end user. The best way to do this is by watching them - a fact exemplified by a recent project undertaken by an US research organisation. Given the task of finding out what people watched on TV during the afternoon, the researchers questioned their participants direct, who in turn reported that they normally watched wildlife documentaries and news programmes. However, when the researchers secretly filmed them, they were watching soaps and talk shows.

But you do not always need such extensive research to understand what your visitors are doing on your site. Some excellent work has been carried out in this area with just ten to 20 sample users. Here at BTextact, we have found that putting the user at the very centre of web design delivers the best results. So we use a continual design improvement process, building in feedback from sample end-users at each design review stage. This coupled with user needs analysis, using both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the needs, behaviours and feelings of users, gives us a usability process, which works.

Indeed, this is validated by positive comments we have received from customers who are now getting the best value from their own websites. Recently, BTopenworld asked us to redesign their online help and registration systems. We were able to reduce the number of registration screens from seven to three to speed up and simplify the process and this - coupled with enhanced on-line help for customers - resulted in a fivefold decrease in the number of helpdesk calls BTopenworld received.

1. *Gartner Research, COM-14-7739, 20th November 2001: 'The Case for Usability and User Experience' J. Wecksell.*

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