

web site usability

losing your audience?

Usability | A Paradigm for Success Online. Communication and engagement in the 21st Century is a democratic process. The Web is an empowering tool for clients. Yet many Web sites leave users feeling powerless, and they vote with their mouse and visit the competition. Getting users swiftly and efficiently to the information they want, presented in an engaging way, will convert more visits into satisfactory experiences, advancing and fulfilling your objectives and mission. **This note introduces best practice considerations to ensure that you achieve your online objectives and get a true return on your investment in your Web site.**

common errors and factors to consider

best practice and convention | The Web has been in use long enough for certain features to have become the norm. Examples include positioning the following functions or information in the top right corner of the user interface:

- › the search function
- › account log in function
- › contact details, including access to the core communication media of e-mail, telephone, facsimile and mail.

non-standard navigation | Eye tracking studies indicate that users scan a Web page in an “F” pattern. Navigation should note this pattern and, importantly, left hand navigation should justify left, to aid the eye in scanning vertically. Additionally, the following conventions should be incorporated into navigation behavior, allowing users to quickly perceive their position within the Web site:

- › navigation should make clear what is a link, either by being underlined or in a different color
- › link navigation should differentiate between what has been viewed and what has not
- › navigation must visually indicate its condition as:
 - » “off” when not being interacted with
 - » “on” or “Hover” which is the condition of the button or link when the cursor is placed over it. This confirms to the user that the link is clickable.
 - » “at” being the condition when the user is actually on that particular page.

architecture | Is the Web site architecture intuitive? Can a user find their way to the information that is of interest to them quickly without stumbling? This requires a focus not on what you want to tell your audience, but on what your audience wants to hear and how the audience wants to hear it. Asking the audience is the best tactic. This can be as extensive or as informal a process as appropriate.

design and flash | Design is an essential factor in a Web site’s overall appeal. It serves to elevate the messaging, capture user interest and draw the user into engagement with the Web site. It must also be carefully balanced with consideration for the functional aspects of the Web site’s purpose and behavior. Some considerations to be borne in mind include:

- › use dynamic features with purpose to enhance the user experience, not to energize an otherwise drab Web site.
- › increasingly, pop-ups are associated with spam and undesired advertising. Web sites that have genuine messaging to convey to the user should anticipate this and allow for design and functionality that provides this information to the user without being blocked. Ajax (jQuery) are effective coding language options to aid the user experience without overuse of Flash or deployment of pop-ups.

content suitable for the web | Users do not read text online as they do offline. Content should be succinct and capable of being visually scanned. Excessive scrolling is to be avoided. Additionally, content must be accurate and timely. Credibility and trust is established, or lost, through this. Use of a content management tool specifically designed for the particular Web site and its needs will help substantially in maintaining timely, accurate and interesting content.

terminology | Convention indicates what users expect to find when they navigate via certain terms. For example, your Web site should use “Contact” not, say, “Connect” or use “About Us” instead of “Company Information.”

fixed layouts and page widths | These should be avoided as they fail to address the wide variety of user screen resolutions and can cause excessive vertical scrolling or, worse, horizontal scrolling. Web sites should be designed to allow for liquidity in display, where the user interface flexibly expands or contracts to the user’s screen specifications, without losing the overall look and feel of the page.

the “fold” | Like a newspaper a Web site often has a “fold,” being that part of a page that is only visible if a user scrolls down. Google is an example of a site that demonstrates the effects of information below the fold. Its statistics show a significant decline

in click through for organic placement below the fold on its returned search results. You, too, must pay attention to screen resolution and the core information that you need to appear above the “fold.”

search engine optimization (SEO) | With the proliferation of content online, users increasingly rely on searching to find information they want. You must pay attention to keeping your site friendly to the search engine algorithms. This includes addressing:

- › rich but not over-saturated deployment of key search terms.
- › clear Web site architecture.
- › efficient use of code.
- › use of robust tools such as Google analytics and Google sitemaps.

about dd|a

We have experience in conducting, participating in and incorporating usability testing into user interface designs and Web site development, having done so for clients such as Omaha Steaks, MidAmerican Energy, The Maids International, Culver Company, Stewart Realty and TD AMERITRADE. Our Webby Award winning team bring that expert knowledge to bear in ensuring we create superior online resources that deliver results for our clients.

a breed apart

We are a holistic branding firm encompassing brand consulting, strategic full service advertising, marketing, graphic design and Web site development. The firm, located in Omaha, Nebraska, professionally counsels brand-driven businesses in making every customer interaction count.

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