

BEST



PRACTICES

VOL. 11 ISSUE 1

WEB USABILITY

It used to be enough just to have a website. Being on the web proved that a company was part of the new world. But things are changing, because web users are changing.

Now that more of us are turning to the web for both work and play, capable researchers have figured out a good bit about how we behave when we are online. That research has led directly to a set of standards about how to construct websites for greatest usefulness and usability.

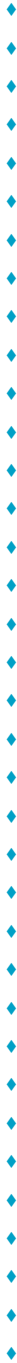
The bad news first: The site that your sister-in-law's middle school nephew designed may not be advancing your business or nonprofit organization as much as it could. You may need to make some usability improvements, which will take time and effort.

The good news: Usability improvements are not mysterious

and do not require fancy programming software. Usability is based in simplicity and consistency. Usability relies on common sense and on anticipating how a visitor to your website wants to use it.

Why should you bother? Because users are becoming more and more discriminating. If your site is not highly usable, no user will feel compelled to stick around and figure it out. Web visitors are in a hurry. If your site is hard to figure out, difficult to read, slow to load, or poorly written, you are inviting visitors to use their favorite device, the "Back" button.

This issue of *Best Practices* helps you look at your site through a usability lens. We suggest some usable sites to examine and offer ways for you to learn more about making your website easier to use or building your first site with usability in mind.



"Users are doing us a favor by visiting our Web sites. . . . We have to give them something of value or they will never come back."

--Philip Greenspun,
Philip and Alex's Guide to Web Publishing

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USABILITY QUIZ

“Achieving ease of use is essential for any site competing for business on the web. The competition is only a couple of clicks away, and if users become dissatisfied, they can simply go elsewhere.”

-- IBM Web Design Guidelines

Usability researchers know quite a bit now about what users find appealing in a website. Test your ideas and see whether you find information that will make your site more usable. Here's the quiz:

Q1. The number one request of web users is:

- a) Make your website look appealing.
- b) Make your website load quickly.
- c) Make your website rich in information.

A1. b) People are in a hurry. They will not wait for your site to load, no matter how neat it will be when it is loaded.

Q2. When users visit your website, their eyes are first drawn to:

- a) Any flashing or moving object.
- b) The navigation links — options for moving to other parts of your site.
- c) The main blocks of text.

A2. c) The text reigns supreme: most users focus on the text first. The first paragraph of your homepage is particularly important; be sure that the text is concise and clear and lets users know what to expect from your site. Usability guru Jakob Nielsen insists that you must devote at least 50 percent of your screen to content, though 80 percent is preferable. That means *everything* else (ads, navigation links, logo, white space) must fit in the remaining space. This kind of space allocation lets visitors to your site know you have placed their interests first.

Q3. Most web users who visit your site are seeking:

- a) A thoughtful expression of your mission, vision, purpose, and capabilities.
- b) A source for solving a problem they face.
- c) A means of entertainment.

A3. b) Web users want answers, and they want help. Offer something of value and make it



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RESOURCES

We admire the work of usability expert Jakob Nielsen. The ideas in this newsletter were heavily influenced by his latest book, *Designing Web Usability* (Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing, 2000), and his website, www.useit.com.

Other information-rich usability websites include:

www.usableweb.com — “a collection of links about human factors, user interface issues, and usable design”

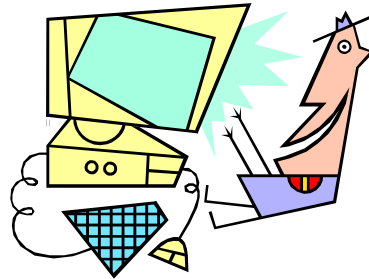
www.webpagesthatsuck.com — “learn good Web design by looking at bad Web design”

easy to find and read. If your site tries to force your ideas, beliefs, or creativity on users, they will resent it and hit the “Back” button.

Q4. Users are more likely to return to your site if:

- a) You use familiar color schemes like white background/black text/blue links, and follow the lead of the most-used sites with regard to placement of links and buttons.
- b) You use creative colors for backgrounds and find new placements for standard features such as the “Home” button and navigation links.
- c) You use an impressive moving graphic as a “splash” page before visitors can see your site contents.

A4. a) Make the “working parts” of your site function like those on solid workhorse sites (www.cnn.com, for example, or www.yahoo.com) and people will stick around and find out what you have to say. Avoid colored backgrounds, unusual button placements, and creative link colors — these slow people down, irritate them, and send them scrambling for the You Know What button.



Sites we have designed:

www.prichardcommittee.org
www.claywainscott.com
www.humanitarium.org
www.verbleworthverble.com

Sites we have redesigned for usability:

www.pfks.org
home.jockeyclub.com
www.robertsandkay.com

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

I built my first website as part of a summer job. I taught myself using books and online tutorials. I had never heard of “usability” or any of the ideas discussed in this newsletter. In spite of all this, I still produced a usable site that was well-liked by its audience.

How did I do it? Simple. I just thought about how people would use the site and then designed it to make those tasks as easy as possible. I used clear links, concise text, and a logical structure.

After creating that site, I began to surf the web with a more critical eye. I quickly became frustrated with clumsy and confusing sites. Some sites just *felt* wrong — I knew they could be easier to use, but I didn’t know exactly how or why.

Then I discovered that web usability researchers have been explaining the how and why for years now. Their ideas rang true to me, and I began to incorporate them into my own designs. Now I make usability the core of every new project.

-- Liz Jones, RKI Web Designer

Here are some characteristics of highly usable websites. Look them over and see how your own site (or your favorite site) compares.

- ◆ fast load times
- ◆ simple and consistent graphic design
- ◆ short sections of text that are easy to scan
- ◆ a handful of main sections linked from every page
- ◆ clear and intuitive navigation
- ◆ accessibility for users who are disabled
- ◆ black text on a white background
- ◆ links in blue and visited links in purple
- ◆ a link to Home on every page
- ◆ familiar section names like “contact us” and “about us”
- ◆ no animations or moving text

Here are some sites we’ve found that meet many of these usability criteria:

- ◆ www.yahoo.com — This ultimate web index is well-organized and easy to use, and downloads in a flash.
- ◆ www.cnn.com — This news site crams an amazing amount of information into a usable homepage.
- ◆ www.google.com — Our favorite search engine returns highly pertinent results and features a delightfully simple homepage.



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Web Usability: Simplicity Rules