



B-to-B Website Usability





Five signs you need to read this paper:

1. You want to incorporate a Flash intro page into your site (or can't bear to part ways with one!)
2. You believe that people are going to patiently pore over your site, marveling at how you have crafted your content.
3. If you are fond of saying: "Everybody knows us – just put our non-descript tagline on the home page as our introductory message"
4. You hate drop-down menus and don't want them on your site – ever.
5. You believe that by adhering to a set of standard web practices, your site will look like everyone else's.

Introduction:

Over the last year or so, usability has become a big buzzword on the Internet. "Usable sites" have become a phrase that most people who are redesigning or considering redesigning their sites are used to hearing. On the surface, it is a concept that is easy to talk about, but difficult to define and act on.

Many people in companies try to enforce their own personal tastes into this subject, resulting in sites that are no more usable than the previous iteration. The reasoning behind their approach is that THEY are the norm - everyone uses a site the way they do and therefore the site they build will be THE model of usability.

But very few can define usability.

The problem is that unless you talk to people who actually build web sites professionally, it is very easy to create a cool-looking site that isn't as customer-focused as it should be. As you sit in your first meetings, who on your team can speak about usability and what people expect to see? Joe from IT? Carol from marketing? Dennis the CEO?

Even better, who is going to do the research and background work? There are some good resources out there. It is very easy to believe that you will find a book, take some time to do the necessary legwork and present the team a solid case for placing certain elements in certain locations. It is also simple to say: "It's all really common sense – we don't need any help with this – besides, I know somebody who does web sites. They'll know." But who has the time?

In our experience, team members cannot separate their own personal feelings about web sites – almost without exception. One person likes Flash movies, another hates them. Joe from IT won't use drop-down menus, but Carol in marketing favors them. Few really understand how people use sites and what elements they are looking for.



Purpose:

This paper will try to help you understand the elements that make a web site usable. For the purposes of this paper, we are defining usability as the way in which visitors directly interact and view web pages.

What is it?

At it's simplest, a usable site is a site that is customer-focused and reduces a visitor's frustration as they use the site. Every visitor has a maximum frustration level – reach it and they are going to leave. The goal of usability is to stay under the level.

A usable site is also one that contains certain elements that visitors have come to expect – these page elements are key in allowing a user to achieve their goals as the visit a web site. It is assumed that the company IS providing its targeted audience with that information.

When we speak of usability, we are talking about how a user directly interacts/views pages – not load testing or technology-based issues.

Usability is like the famous Supreme Court line “I know it when I see it ...” Everyone has definite ideas on what makes a site usable and what doesn't. During the course of my business day, I inevitably engage in a conversation with people in which they talk about visiting sites that were frustrating to use for a variety of reasons, real and imagined.

Usability sounds very easy, but for many companies it is a hard concept to understand. The dominant themes on the Internet have been that web sites were company-, technology- or design-focused (in many cases some strange combination of all three). The emphasis on the customer has been lacking until today – on most sites, it's all about getting the company message out, rather than understanding that it is really all about the visitor.

Background:

The confusion around usability stems from the history of the Internet, which can be broken down very roughly into three stages:

First generation (funky design-focused): or the “Creative Era.” The Web was fresh and new and all sorts of flashy, creative, cool things sprouted up, with no thought as to how people used sites or how information should be presented. In fact most of these sites had no real information, but were just extremely loud digital bulletin boards. Creative-types ran the show. The color schemes, the animated graphics... fond childhood memories

Second generation (design/company-focused): commercial web sites make their way onto the scene. Banner ads, Flash intros and money become the dominant themes. Everyone has an idea of how to profit from the Web, many ideas are tried, most eventually fail. Creative still dominates, with no thought to the end-users.



Companies blindly threw printed marketing material online, hoping that visitors will find and use their info as it is viewed internally – they don't understand that people may not always understand what they are talking about in their company-focused internal jargon. Growing pains (think those turbulent teenage years) abound, but it was an exciting time.

Third generation (customer-focused): Welcome to today's Internet! ROI dominates! Everyone wants a return on his or her investment. People realize that HOW people use web sites is as important as WHAT is on the web site. Flashy, impractical designs are slowly replaced by functional, usable, standardized concepts where users can actually use the site and find information that fulfills their needs. Companies realize that not everything can be sold on the Web, but a web site can be a powerful marketing tool.

Considerable interest is shown in how people use the site and on reducing user frustration – friendly, readable, clean sites begin to spring up. Giving the people what they want is now the "in-thing," because this generates leads and sales. Creative serves usability, rather than being the whole show.

Creativity has been THE theme on the Internet, but that is changing rapidly – companies are realizing that people are into speed and readability. Visitors don't want to figure out a site; What is the navigation? What is a link? What does the company do? They want to use it.

Speed rules on the Internet – and there are no speed limits. However, as you will see, there is no thinking on the Web.

Why is it important?

Usability applies to all sites, no matter the size or industry. Usability also applies to shopping carts, extranets/intranets – wherever there is visitor interaction with a web page.

In B-to-B companies, where the products are expensive and usually have long sales cycles, the web site has evolved into a combination of lead generation tool, customer extranet, marketing and sales-support tool. Most of these products are not going to be sold through a web site and the whole process can take months and even years. The value of the site is in its messaging and information contained on its pages – it can be a very effective lead generation tool, marketing vehicle and customer-service platform.

So it has become increasingly important that the company provide information to prospects and decision-makers in a format that is fast, easy to use and understandable. It must also contain information that answers questions that the visitor has – easier said than done. In many cases, your web site is the first impression that you will make on a potential client – if it is hard to use, vague and they can't find information that they want, you are starting off on the wrong foot.

In competitive markets, they may become frustrated and move on to a competitor – the worst scenario.



We have seen sites that held all the right answers, but the navigation and messaging were so bad we couldn't get to the info – and ended up leaving. Hopefully, a frustrated customer picks up the phone or emails you, but even still, a tone has been set – one that is ringing in their ears.

ROI of Usability:

Of course, any investment today will have to provide a positive ROI – management wants to know what they are going to get in return for any project. Try to keep a straight face as you tell a VP of Sales that you are going to give him a usable site. Better yet, watch his face contort and his breathing becomes very measured.

Whereas many companies are focused on immediate “A” leads (have budget, have immediate need), building a ROI case can be difficult. Very few companies are actually categorizing inquiries from the web site, turning “A” leads over to salespeople, nurturing “B” and “C” leads over time and then tracking them as they enter a sales pipeline – without this information, an investment into a marketing site can be hard to wrestle out of nervous management teams.

I am always amazed when companies tell me that they don't really pay attention to the web as a lead generation tool – they claim they get lots of frivolous inquiries, people who are just looking and other miscellaneous emails. Every company should have business rules in place to handle this aspect of marketing – especially when one customer can pay for a web site over the course of his relationship with the company. In some cases, one sale from the web can justify a new site, but this is a subject for an entire white paper of its own.

With the right information, ROI cases can be built – but the key is getting that information. Sadly, most companies don't really have it.

Costs of Usability Testing:

Another dark area – typically, most companies don't spend enough time analyzing their web sites for usability. Therefore once a design is approved (based on the web teams consensus), it is full speed ahead into the development process.

Leading usability experts believe that at least 10% of the project budget should be marked for testing. This involves bringing the design to end-users (clients, vendors, etc.) and asking them to do some testing on how they found the site to use. When time and money are mixed together, most companies ignore this aspect and rely on themselves to determine usability.

Needles to say, most companies ignore this area all together.



Who decides on usability?

There is no governing body that sits and meets on these issues and definitions, nor should web teams decide based on their personal likes/dislikes. There are some usability experts with many differing opinions, but usability should be looked at as a whole – not as an individual. Usability is governed by the researched habits of users and a dash of common sense.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to get teams or people who don't realize that the Internet has grown up OR don't use the Internet regularly to understand this important concept. We all know that person who won't/can't agree on anything, but has the definitive idea on what the site should look like. In some cases, it may be a peer, but in other cases it is a member of senior management (or worse, a nephew of a senior management member who took a web design course!)

In our experience, companies in certain industries have extreme difficulties in understanding the usability issue. They tend to look at the web very conservatively (as if usability was a radical thought) and cling to design- and company-focused ideas. In many cases, these tend to be the beliefs of owners and upper management who don't think people are looking for their particular products or services – but they aren't good judges of how people really use web sites.

They want something that resembles what their biggest competitor has (if it was expensive it must be good, right?) Often, they don't even think that people are looking for them online. By creating a web site that appeals to the web team, they think they are capturing the way the vast majority of web users will use their site. And usually, they are too concerned with the creative aspect – link colors, hidden rollovers and Flash intros.

Dispelling some pesky myths:

To begin understanding how we approach usability, a few myths need to be discussed (you will quickly see how they build on each other):

Myth 1: People will patiently read through endless paragraphs of text to find information.

Reality: People do not read on the Internet – they scan. And scan frantically

When first-time prospects hit a home page, they are not reading, they are scanning. They are going to decide within 3 seconds if your company can help them. If they are repeat visitors, they will have more patience, but not much more. On interior pages they will scan to find the info THEY want, but they will not read through 5 paragraphs of text to get that info.

Myth 2: People randomly scan a home page.

Reality: Users consistently use home pages the same way.

According to the Stanford Poynter Project, visitors will start in the upper left (identifying where they are), scan diagonally to the bottom right and then focus back on the middle of the page



to determine if you can ease whatever pain they are experiencing. The findings come from using optical devices to track people's eye movement as they hit a home page.

Myth 3: It isn't necessary to tell visitors who you are and what you do – companies in your market KNOW you and what you do, or they wouldn't have shown up there in the first place. Reality: You must tell/remind them on impact: who you are, what you do and how you can help them.

I will come back to this point later – I hear arguments against it so often it is deserving of special attention.

Myth 4: Companies should put everything on the home page – give them everything at once. Reality: You must prioritize your layout and information you put forth on the home page – overwhelming them isn't the way to go.

This is a very popular format for e-commerce, news and club/membership sites. They throw everything onto the home page and hope the user can pick out something on their own. This isn't the best approach for B-to-B sites (or even large e-commerce sites.)

Myth 5: It is good to be “different” – why look like everyone else?

Reality: People understand where certain page elements belong and what they should do – this is the key to usability.

This point is related to the above Myths – people do not use their brains on the Internet! It gets checked until they find something that looks like the info they want – then they retrieve the brain. Thinking while scanning is some sort of Internet violation. So putting elements in places they aren't expected is similar to changing a red light to mean, “go” – chaos and confusion.

Information Architecture

Why?:

Information architecture has many strategies and many more advocates, each with a system. All of them boil down to creating a structure and labeling system that will make for a usable site. You can't build a customer-focused web site without understanding who your audience is, who is coming to the site and what information they are looking for.

It bears stating the very obvious here: if your site cannot meet the needs/goals of the users who visit, or worse, they can't find the information, they will simply disappear to your competitor's domain to find what they need. If you don't meet their needs, your objectives will remain unfulfilled. The Internet is full of sites, some of very well known companies, which failed in this area.



The goal of information architecture is to analyze the needs of the two parties involved (users and the company) and blend the two together.

Users:

Why are users coming to your site? What are they looking for? Who are they? All very important questions that have to be answered. If you don't know, you will be the proud owner of an ineffective web site.

Users come to a site for a variety of reasons: to learn about the company, perform some form of competitive analysis, solve a problem, respond to an offer or receive news. Often there will be several types of users that come to your site: some may be first timers who are looking for some information, some may be established customers who need to get very specific information and another may be looking for technical information. Right away, we have established that we are going to need specific information and materials for each of the various segments of the audience.

Your company:

Clients often tell us: "Ours is a niche market. Our customers know us and what we do." They then proceed to give us a discourse on why these steps aren't important. They mistakenly believe that they don't need to define user's goals or create paths for users. So they insist on navigation and content that looks good to them, but leaves visitors confused and frustrated.

Your needs are very obvious (we hope): generate demand for services, capture that demand, educate your audience, prompt an action, reinforce your brand and most importantly, channel the user to his goal. But your objectives should be laid out early in the process.

The Right Combination:

For example, let's say your team has decided to make the site a lead generation tool (the goal we hear most of all) – you want to obtain leads to fill a marketing database. How are you going to do this? Look at two examples:

Company A

Company "A" believes that they are well known in their industry – everyone understands what they do and who they are. Since they are so well known, Company A's senior leadership doesn't think many companies are looking online for them - they build a web presence that reflects this attitude: company-focused, with lots of printed marketing content.

They have their standard, printed marketing content on their pages and create a design that consists of imagery and labels full of company jargon that they assume everyone outside the company knows and understands. They have opted to use a designer known for his flashy designs. They hope that their "Contact Us" form will provide them a few new leads.



Company B:

Company “B” doesn’t assume that everyone knows who they are and understands that people (not companies) are looking for them on the Internet. They are proactive and create customer-focused content and designs that avoid company jargon. They spend some time analyzing what their visitors are looking for and how they can get it to them as they move throughout the site.

They place “calls-to-action” on most pages, targeted at the needs and objectives of their visitors. By placing case studies, demos and other downloads that address specific problems behind these “calls-to-action”, they realize they can gain strategic data from prospects to fill that marketing database. If they help make a prospect aware of how they can solve problems, they have a good chance of getting a new client in the future.

A simple (and real-life example) of how being customer-focused meets their needs AND you satisfies your needs.

The days of the design-and company-focused sites are over – if they weren’t, we would all still be staring at Flash intro movies. Take some time to analyze the needs of your visitors, what info they are looking for and how to get it to them.

The Elements of Usability

What they are:

Remember, we are trying to create an environment where visitors can move easily to achieve their goals and needs. We are trying to reduce their frustration as they travel within a site, looking for information that satisfies their needs. Each frustration point adds up, until they leave your site, perhaps never coming back.

People are creatures of routine – on some level it assures us that things are going well and we can look forward with some certainty. We have learned how to interact with the Web because we have grown with it. As it has evolved, so have we.

Having key elements on a page is the biggest way to reduce wear and tear on visitors – they know what elements should be on a page and where they should go. When you don’t provide them, you force them to slow down and (gasp!) THINK. Thinking while browsing is dangerous for the user, but absolutely lethal to your site because they will abandon it once their maximum frustration level is reached.

The following list of elements covers those that are necessary for a usable web site. Usability experts all have ideas and can get very nit-picky and specific – fortunately we are above that. The elements are:

1. Main Messaging/Value Proposition
2. Navigation (including main, subsection and page/section identifiers)



3. Logo/Identity Area
4. Utilities
5. Content
6. Design

Main Messaging/Value Proposition

**** Main Messaging is the combination of imagery, tagline and value propositions that tell the visitor what you do upon IMPACT. It should convey an immediate sense of what you do and your benefits ****

Remember, most people will start in the upper left corner, scan diagonally to the bottom right corner and then lock their eyes back into the middle of the pages. They will then move the mouse around, check out the navigation, and make a decision what they are going to click – all within 2 seconds.

Messaging is the most ignored, misunderstood element of most corporate sites. It usually appears only on the home page, but its importance is almost always ignored or misconstrued. In our experience, a typical B-to-B site may serve multiple objectives (marketing, customer service, employee optimization/intranet, public relations, investor relations, channel partner relations), but in most cases, its main focus will be to gain **NEW LEADS AND PROSPECTS**.

In our experience and opinion, 85% of the sites we analyze have messaging that needs improvement.

We see logos being used in place of messaging (the “Everyone knows us” argument”), we see 3 – 5 paragraphs of text explaining what companies do, we see navigation serving as messaging and we see images that flash, scroll, fade and blink – this last group gives us headaches. Frequently.

If your messaging is poor, how will the visitor react? They won’t take the time to start searching for information until they determine if they are in the right place – remember, they are scanning, not reading. There is **NO** penalty for telling a prospect, a client, a repeat visitor, your sister or the CEO’s nephew who you are, what you do and what benefits you can bring to the table – the penalty for not telling them can be severe. As in they leave and you don’t make a good first impression.

Which brings me to the objection I most often hear:

“Nobody who hits our site is going to need to be told what we do. They wouldn’t be there if they didn’t know. And if they **DON’T** know, they’re not our prospects anyway.”



And my standard reply:

“Even if a user has sought you out in a search engine, or visited your site as a result of a marketing promotion, they STILL need a reminder UPON IMPACT that they gave come to a place WORTH GOING TO for them.”

We don't understand this reasoning – companies don't do research for products – people do. It is very possible that the CEO, CIO or CTO may know who you are, but that low-level assistant or intern who is doing the research probably doesn't. Tell them. Remind them. Reassure them.

We don't recommend that the imagery be product-specific, necessarily. If a company manufactures widgets, I don't want to use a picture of a widget – the visitor may not know what a widget looks like. Instead I want to find an image of something that the widget is used in/for. Or the benefits or end result of using the widget. Don't be too abstract. The image shouldn't be a selling point – many industries have a tough ordeal finding the right imagery.

The headline and value propositions are what make great messaging – but it rarely happens. In many cases, not enough thought is put into it them. The headline should tell what it is you do. Value propositions tell the visitor what you can do for them and how you can ease their troubles. It is here that company politics and power struggles surface.

If the company has come up with a catchy slogan, someone will argue that it should be on the site. Personal tastes come into play, departmental intrigue comes to the surface – and the easiest thing to do is just use that catchy marketing/branding phrase. It can be the most difficult thing for a company to get right.

It is important to note that the three must be located in a geographic area – scattering them around the page isn't good Main Messaging. Pull them all together and create something that lets the visitor know if you can help them or not. Immediately. Good messaging can immediately qualify or disqualify prospects.

There are exceptions for every rule. A few players dominate some industries – they don't need messaging (Amazon, for example.) But for the vast majority of businesses on the web, this is not the case.

Logo/Identity Area:

** The Logo/Identity area tells them that they have arrived where they set out to go, and serves as a visual anchor as they move through the site. **

It should go in the upper left hand corner of your design – this is where their eyes will go first as the hit the home page and as they move through your site on interior pages.

This is a fairly standard item, even among older sites. The company logo will typically be in the upper-left corner of the design, reminding people that they have arrived at their



destination. I have seen logos used as messaging on a page, placed at the bottom of pages, in all manner of spots – put them up high where they will announce your site properly. It is ok to place short taglines under the logo, but not descriptive paragraphs.

In today's pop-up crazy world, people will constantly refer to the logo as they move (mostly out of their periphery), so it is an important feature of a page. On interior pages it should also be linked back to the home page – a standard web convention. Most people in business know this one.

The logo should not be so large as to dominate the page – it is just a “visual anchor.”

Utility Tools/Area:

** The Utility/Identity area is found in the upper right corner of a web page. It contains tools/links that can help answer questions in one location. **

People today know that when they have a question or get frustrated, they can look in the top right corner of a web page to find “tools” or links that will help them find the answers/information they are looking for. They can be tastefully done with text, icons or graphics.

This is an element that most people are familiar with. Everyone has been on a site that has these tools – and it has become common to group them all together in one area. Common tools that can be found up here are “Search,” “Site Map,” “Contact Us,” “Home” and any Login links (client/partner extranet, etc.)

Many older sites have these elements, but they are scattered around the page or buried in main navigation. I also see these tools at the bottom of pages – where nobody would think to look for them.

I have heard usability experts who don't want boxes (they want links) – if you are going to use a Search box, make it look like a standard Search box and use terminology that makes it apparent what they can accomplish. Don't get crazy or wordy – “Search” will work just fine. In the past, a search function could be costly (in terms of money to develop), but unless your site is very small, users have come to expect it.

Another benefit of creating this element is that it provides you a perfect place to put a phone number. It has been very fashionable for sites to hide their contact information on distant pages – give it to them up front! If they have a question, don't you want them to call and talk to someone in your company? Placing it in the right-hand corner means that they will see it regularly, as opposed to slapping it on the bottom of the page and hoping they will find it.



Navigation (Main and sub-section):

** Navigation systems should be in areas that users are accustomed to seeing them. They should be identifiable almost immediately. They are your transportation system – mark them clearly. **

This is an element that offers lots of styles: drop-down menus, tab-style menus text links, graphics, rollovers, etc. In the past, navigation was all over the place – it could look like just about anything and be located anywhere. Finding it could be a problem.

It is important to pay attention to the labeling that you use in your site – be as customer-focused as possible, avoiding internal company jargon. Try and put yourself in their shoes – be clear and concise.

On newer sites, navigation can be found in one of two locations: running across the top of the page or down the left-hand side. When people are looking for navigation, these are the areas that they expect to see it. On interior pages, it is very common to see main navigation across the top AND sub-section navigation running down the left – this system is known as the “Inverse-L.”

As far as which style of navigation to use, there are many. Drop-down and tab-style systems seem to be the most popular for large sites. The advantage of any multi-level flyout navigational system is that it allows users to see what is within each section before they actually have to enter. Most of these systems are browser/platform friendly – the older ones were buggy and didn’t work well in certain browsers.

Within interior pages, it is fine to have a rollout menu at the top of the page, persisting from page to page, while the sub-section navigation changes on the left (it may even be a rollout menu) – redundancy is fine, as long as it isn’t overkill. People should always have main-level navigation options available wherever they are on the site.

Lots of people inform me that they don’t like these types of systems – but they are something the majority of users have come to expect on large web sites. You must look at usability in terms of what the majority of users have come to know and expect.

Content:

** Content should be short and to the point. Don’t overwhelm them with volumes of text – the less words the better. They aren’t going to wade through volumes of text to find the info they need. Be as customer-focused as possible. **

Forrester Research has done surveys where 75% of Internet users stated they were unhappy with the content on the web – an incredible number!

Be as customer-focused as possible. By identifying the users that are coming to your site, you can target the information that they want to see and provide it to them. The less words



the better – again, they will do more reading on interior pages, but not much more than on home pages.

This is an area where most companies feel they can cut corners – writing or re-writing content for a web site can be a daunting task (even a small one.) The physical act of writing each page and then getting it approved and the politics and opinions that go along with it is a draining battle. But it is something that a huge number of Internet users think should be done.

It is common to see text bolded or various shades of colors to represent a clickable link. Many pages will bold or highlight important points by using these conventions, making it hard to identify what is a text link and what isn't. Generations of Internet users learned early in their development that underlining identified it as "clickable." Don't waste all those years of learning – if it is a text link, underline it.

Design:

**** Design should incorporate usability and be customer-focused – this makes some people and companies uneasy. ****

At some point we will hear;

"We all agree we want our site to be usable and customer-focused, but we want to develop a site that is unique and custom-looking. If we use these elements you are talking about, our site will look like everyone else's"

What they are really saying is that they don't agree with usability. Of course your design should reflect the image that your company wants to portray to the public – usability shouldn't interfere with that. But a great, custom design should incorporate these elements – they allow the visitor to use it as they have become accustomed to using sites.

Nobody likes to write it, but the Internet is becoming standardized (if it wasn't, we wouldn't be writing this paper!) Conventions are good things – they allow users to move freely and easily through sites. Just as software packages put certain elements in certain locations, the web is moving towards that same ideal.

One concern people consistently ask about is one of "liquidity." Liquidity is where the physical design of the site (not a background) expands or contracts to fit the screen resolution of the viewer. Its advantage is that on larger resolutions (1024 x 768) the visitor isn't left with a large piece of screen that is empty – the design and content will flow out to the edges of the screen.

In older browsers, programming and designing for liquidity was problematic – the older versions of Netscape were brutal to get liquidity to work. Newer browser versions are much easier to work with, making this issue less of a factor. Most people in business use 1024 x 768 resolution, but you must design for the lowest common denominator – the 800 x 600 resolution.



Typing it all together

Now you know the main elements of usability - these are the elements you should try to incorporate into your site. By adhering to these best practices, you will create an environment that allows visitors to move around your site in a manner that they are used to (read: without thinking too hard.)

As you start to build your site, keep these thoughts in mind:

1. Am I making them think?
2. Are elements where they are going to expect to see them?
3. Can they tell what is important?

Home page:

This is the most important page of your site because it tells a visitor what you do, where they can go and what they can expect to find.

It must:

- Tell what you do and how you can help them (Main Messaging)
- Identify where they are (Logo/Identity)
- Establish a persistent means of transportation (Navigation)
- Provide them with tools to get immediate answers (Utilities)
- Keep the design clean

Keeping the design clean and simple can be difficult. The bigger the company offerings, the harder it will be to get the home page right (and meet the approval of all involved). The home page can't be everything to everyone – if it ends up doing just that, odds are it is going to be a chaotic mess.

Avoid putting lots of small text links onto your home page. Sites often group them under sections: “About Us,” “What’s New” and “Current Events” – but they are still small text links and on a home page, where people are scanning, they will be ignored or overlooked.

These sites are very common, but the problem is that you can change these text links daily – it just never looks as if the home page is updated or changed. Text is just text on a home page. Use a mix of text and graphics and avoid being too “busy” – understand what the visitor is looking for and provide it to them.

Interior pages:

From section to section you can vary the look slightly, but don't drastically change – keep a consistent design going.

It should:

- Identify where they are (Logo/Identity)
- Establish a persistent means of transportation (Navigation)



- Provide them with tools to get immediate answers (Utilities)
- Provide concise customer-focused content

The interior pages lay the information out for viewing – make sure you do it well. Place your value propositions near the top of the content area. Don't create hidden rollovers, small fonts, and unrecognizable fonts – don't make them think about it.

If you are going to have text links, make it obvious what is a link and what isn't. Don't overdue the text links – if it is important, then it should be in your navigation or emphasized with a graphic element. When they are scanning, text is text – it all looks the same.

The longer the page, the less likely that they are going to scroll down to see what's at the bottom – put the important stuff at the top.

Conclusion:

Usability revolves around how people use web sites – specifically the elements that they want to see on a web page. Reducing their frustration as they move about means that they have a better chance of finding the information that they seek, which will in turn allow you to meet your objectives.

As the Internet has matured, users have become increasingly aware of what elements should be on a page, where they should be and how to use them – this is what usability is all about. This is a subject that more and more companies need to understand when talking about their site and their visitors. The Internet has become customer-focused and companies need to understand what their targeted audience is looking for.

The problems with usability are that people/teams are unable to separate their personal tastes from how the majority of users operate, the costs of doing usability analysis and the difficulty of generating a ROI analysis for a B-to-B marketing web site. While not overly difficult to overcome, they do involve time and money, things that are hard to come by in a tough economy.

The elements we like to see on a site are Main Messaging, a Logo/Identity area, a Utility area, persistent navigation, and customer-focused content and design. Avoid using company jargon in labeling and keep everything clean – for better scanning and skimming.

A great design will include these elements, while giving your site an identifiable look and feel. In many cases, your web site is your chance to make a great impression – being usable is a huge part of that.

Remember: if they can't use it – they won't!

However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results

Winston Churchill

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