Web Marketers: Learn The User Experience!

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> *The ability of the customer to use a Web site is a significant component of the customer's experience. That experience is your brand.*

A s a Marketer, you have probably read that the Web is a different medium. But few people really understand how different. More than simply adjusting your marketing technique, you need to learn a whole new set of skills. You need to understand "usability" and the "customer experience".

What is usability?

From the customer's point of view, it is simple. Is the site easy to use? Is it useful? This means easily finding the information where they need it or being able to complete a purchase process in a timely manner. Does the site frustrate their ability to accomplish their task? Does the site confuse them? In short, can the customer use the site or is it like programming their VCR? From the designer's perspective, usability is about setting up the Web site so it is intuitive and meets the user's expectations. It requires understanding how people behave on a Web site.

This is closer to product design than the print design with which marketers are most familiar. Products are used. They have to be functional. Customers need to be able to operate them. Product designers have tested and improved their product's usability as a matter of course.

Thinking about usability is new to most marketers, however. It is taken for granted. When a marketer sends out a post card, we expect customers to be able to use it. Our schools have spent a considerable amount of time training our customers to be able to properly handle a post card. Those customers understand what it is and what it is for. The same is not true for the Web. Web marketing must now incorporate how people behave.

As a marketer, you now have to understand those Web behaviors to be successful. Paying attention to how people behave will increase click-thru. For example, people tend to scan a Web page rather than read it. One consequence of that behavior is that you should make your titles no longer than 40 to 60 characters and be explicit (don't use "marketeese"). If you do this, you can expect a much better response. People have learned to ignore Web ads. A recent DMA case study showed that if you make an ad look like information rather than an ad, it will generate significantly greater click-thru. [1]

One company, Creative Good, has seen conversion increases of over 200% as a result of incorporating usability into Web design. Forrester Research estimates that sites loose approximately 50% of potential sales because people can't find what they need. In addition, they found that 40% of those users would not return to the site. [2] According to

research by Mauro New Media, "For every dollar you spend improving the visual design or style of your site, you will receive virtually no improvement in sales. The same dollar spent on improving core behavioral interactions with your site's critical way-finding and form-filling functions will, however, return $50-100." [3]

> *Usability on the Web isn't a luxury. On the Internet, it's survival of the easiest: If customers can't find a product, they can't buy it. It's cheaper to increase the design budget than the ad budget, and attention to usability can increase the percentage of Web-site visitors who complete a purchase.* [4] *- Jacob Nielson*

To understand Web behaviors, you cannot simply rely on your instincts. [5] You must test your Web site to understand customer behavior and incorporate those findings into it. Even experienced usability experts test their assumptions. And if you are a marketing executive, you need to be asking for those test results.

The good news is that direct marketers have a traditional set of measuring tools that can be adapted to improve usability. These include measuring click-thru, focus groups and A/B testing. For example, using simple A/B testing, The DMA has found that carefully choosing link labels makes them easier for customers to use. In our test, using the right link labels doubled the click-thru! In fact, according to Forrester Research, "Firms should embrace a mindset of continuous improvement by adopting A/B testing methods to evaluate alternative design solutions on an ongoing basis." [6]

Usability design is a significant component of the larger customer experience, but only a part of it. You must also understand the customer's experience.

What is the customer experience?

Experience is responsible for 80 percent of a strong brand. [7] It is more than fonts, tag lines, offers and click-thru. A customer's interaction with a Web site conveys more than the graphic identity of the company. The experience of moving through the site and making purchases affect how your customers actually feel about your company. That feeling helps determine if and how often they will want to do business with you. Is it easy; is it intelligent; is it informative, understandable, convenient and direct? That experience *is* your brand.

Further, your Web site is just one part of the customer experience. It is in your store, your products and your customer service. Your brand is not in your marketing. It is in the promise of the customer experience.

Resources

There is now a considerable body of research-based knowledge of how people behave on the Web. The following sites will provide a starting point for finding out more about Web usability and the customer experience:

Usability.gov – US Government research-based standards for Web site design and usability.

Creative Good - Founded in 1997 and based in New York City, Creative Good is the industry's first and oldest customer experience firm.

Useit.com - Articles about designing human-centered products and services by one of the leading researchers of usability.

Ease Of Use Web Design Guidelines – IBM's own Web standards based on their extensive research.

[1] *AB Testing A Web Ad – A Case Study*, Robert Blakeley, http://www.rblakeley.com/webwork/TestingAnInternetAdCaseStudy.pdf: January 2005.

[2] *Why Most Web Sites Fail*, Interactive Technology Series, Volume 3, Number 7, Harley Manning, John C. McCarthy, and Randy K. Souza, Forrester Research: September 1998.

[3] Professional Usability Testing And Return On Investment As It Applies To User Interface Design For Web Based Product And Services, Charles L. Mauro, Mauro New Media, http://www.mauronewmedia.com/pdf/MNMwhitepaper.pdf: 2002.

[4] *Web-Site Usability: Usability On The Web Isn't A Luxury*, Jakob Nielsen and Donald A. Norman, in InformationWeek, http://www.informationweek.com/773/web.htm: January 2000

[5] The Web can sometimes generate very strong feelings in professionals about what is good or bad based on their personal opinions rather than research. It happens enough to have a label: pixel hubris.

[6] *Four Essential Practices Of Good Web Design,* Best Practices, Harley Manning, Bruce D. Temkin, and Elizabeth Backer, Forrester Research: December 2004.

[7] *Survival Of The Fittest,* Phil Terry, Creative Good, http://www.creativegood.com/doc/creativegood-survival-fittest.pdf: May 2004.

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