

Guidelines for designing website usability



This checklist is designed to help those who wish to design usable websites. It assumes a basic knowledge of the Internet (World Wide Web) and Web Browsers.

The Internet is a powerful medium for business and the main factor that encourages people to return to a site is the 'ease-of-use' or 'usability' of a given website, after all a business's competitors are only a mouse-click away.

MCI Standards

This checklist has relevance to the MSC National Occupational Standards for Management: Key Roles A and B - Manage Activities and Manage Resources.

Definition

A website is a collection of web pages in a specific location indicated by the uniform URL on the Internet. People navigate web pages in order to find information or a service. Website usability is the *effectiveness, efficiency, satisfaction* with which people find what they are looking for.

Research has shown that customers expect to find menus, logos, etc., in specific areas on a webpage. By following such established conventions, websites immediately become more usable.

The advantages and disadvantages of website usability

The advantages of website usability

- ▼ The rules to implement website usability are easy to understand
- ▼ Website usability can be tested, measured, and improved upon
- ▼ Free software validators exist to check that your website is cleanly implemented
- ▼ Knowing the rules of website usability before deciding to break them will enable you to approximate which types of customers may no longer visit your site

The disadvantages of website usability

- ▼ No matter how usable your site becomes you cannot design for every user. There are too many ways of accessing the Internet (mobile phones, screen readers, television)
- ▼ Following usability rules may restrict your ability to create a super 'flashy' website

Website usability checklist

1. Download time and getting to the main page

- ▼ Any webpage should take less than 10 seconds to download. If it takes longer look at your graphics and illustrations – trim them. They should use 5-15% of the page layout
- ▼ Splash screens, pop-up screens and Flash introduction movies should be used sparingly and with a clearly marked 'close' button
- ▼ Do not use automatic playing music
- ▼ Do not use frames. They make navigation impossible as they do not provide 'where am I' cues

2. Page layout

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Users expect a specific page layout:

- ▼ Page layout should be optimized for a width of 770 pixels (a range of 620-1024 pixels) and one or two screens long (maximum 1000 to 1600 pixels). Think of the screen as being 'above the fold' on a broadsheet. Will your user scroll down? Make the layout liquid so it resizes easily
- ▼ The logo should be in the top left hand corner and a maximum of 80 x 86 pixels
- ▼ The search facility should be in the top left or right hand corner of homepage, preferably a white box of 25-30 characters and next to a button labelled search. Search only your site. Do not offer to search the whole Internet
- ▼ Only offer help if your site is very complex. Help placement should be top right hand corner. If your site needs instructions are people really going to want to visit it?
- ▼ Use icons (e.g. buttons, tabs, envelope to indicate mail) that are clearly recognisable. Do not invent your own. If you use tabs make sure they behave in a tab-style manner. Do not use buttons if you cannot click on them
- ▼ Be conventional when naming your navigation areas: Jobs, About us, Contact us, Home, Site map are all areas expected and looked for by users. If you have a sign in area call it 'sign in'

3. Navigation

Every user should be able to look at a page in your website and answer the questions:

- ▼ Where am I? Where have I been? Where can I go? What is here?

Navigation from the 'home' page to other pages in the website usually involves one of four types:

- ▼ Left hand rail (e.g. news.bbc.co.uk)
- ▼ Tabs at the top (e.g. Amazon.co.uk)
- ▼ Links across the top
- ▼ Categories in the middle of the page

The first three are the best. Categories in the middle of the page waste space. Group similar style elements together in the menu. Do not provide a navigation area linking to parts of the same page. If the page is long split it up into several pages.

Footer navigation links are useful if you are going to have long scrolling down pages. Do not have a link that says 'back to top'. 7 text links are the maximum that look good on the bottom of a page.

Go broad rather than deep link-wise (more than 2 links from the home page is considered 'deep'). If you must go deep have localised sub-menus. Do not have dynamically updating menus as they can be difficult to remember. Avoid drop-down menus as they can be difficult to negotiate with a mouse.

Site maps are useful to illustrate to the user how the site is constructed. Do not use an image (e.g. flowchart) instead use a plain page with links.

4. Ensure trust

Trust is important. If your website doesn't inspire confidence no one will want to do business with you:

- ▼ Under the revised Data Protection Act of 1998 if you are asked by users, you are obliged to show them any information you may have collected about them
- ▼ By the same ecommerce application of the law you are legally obliged to put your name and geographical (physical) address on your website
- ▼ If you are collecting information about visitors such as their email address, name, etc., it is good practice to have a privacy policy page linked from the 'home page' ensuring them that you will not abuse such information (e.g. sell it to third parties)
- ▼ Have an 'About us' section so people can see the company is real

5. Create 'scannable' pages

People rarely read a whole website. They are normally looking for something and therefore, 'scan' the pages. Make it easy for them:

- ▼ Page background should be white and text should be black for maximum contrast
- ▼ Body text is best if it is 12 points and sans-serif (e.g. Arial, Helvetica, Verdana). Titles work best in Times Roman. Limit the amount of fonts and sizes you use to a total of 4 on a page
- ▼ Make sure links are prominent by underlying and highlighting in blue, with the links becoming purple once they have been visited
- ▼ Do not fix text size so that users can change the size of the font if they need to
- ▼ Avoid too much use of colour, background images and capital letters. These all slow down the user's ability to 'scan'
- ▼ If you have a 'strap-line' or 'tag-line' make sure it describes what your company does

6. Use templates and cascading style sheets (CSS)

Templates enable you to have uniform pages. They also allow users to become familiar with your site and page layouts and know where they are and what they can do. Familiarity helps usability.

Cascading style sheets (or style sheets) enable you to take out the specifications of text colour, font, background etc. and 'tags' that are in html code and put them in one file which all templates can access. This enables you to provide uniform web pages. It also helps users to read the web using their own style sheets.

7. Quick test the site

Look at each site on your page and ask:

- ▼ What site is this? (Site identification e.g. logo)
- ▼ What page am I on? (Page name e.g. home, services)
- ▼ What are the major sections of this site? (Section headings)
- ▼ What are my options at this level? (Local navigation e.g. a menu)
- ▼ Where am I in the scheme of things? ("You are here" indicators)
- ▼ How can I search?

Look at the www.w3.org website for their free software validators which will check your html code and style sheets and see if they are clean. Clean code and style sheets ensure that your pages will look 'correct' on the majority of browsers.

8. Provide alternatives to Flash, java script, multimedia

Not everyone will have the latest plug-in installed. Scripts that detect what your user has installed cannot be relied upon. Therefore, use 'flashy' plug-ins sparingly and have an alternative plain html page.

Dos and don'ts for effective web usability

Do

- ▼ Write with the Internet in mind – billboard style
- ▼ Spend time creating your navigation and page layout
- ▼ Check for broken links either with software or by hand
- ▼ Get others to look at your site. Have you overlooked something really obvious?
- ▼ Be consistent

Don't

- ▼ Have automatically playing music
- ▼ Use frames

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- ▼ Make your site complex with intricate navigation systems
- ▼ Force people to sign in and use your site. Let them look about first
- ▼ Make your home page too different from the rest of your site

How to assess website usability effectiveness

- ▼ Test the site – ask people in the company, your friends, your family to use your website and then observe what they do. Do they understand the layout? Do they enjoy using it?
- ▼ Look at the weblog (your website statistics – which are either in a weblog file or are provided by your website host) and find out how many visitors (not ‘hits’) you have. If you do make your website more usable see if the numbers have increased. What are your most popular pages? Ask why are they popular?
- ▼ Ask yourself if your site meets the HOME RUN (Nielsen, www.useit.com) rules:
 - ▼ **H**igh Quality Content (is it interesting?)
 - ▼ **O**ften updated (depending on what the company and its website offer)
 - ▼ **M**inimal download (not waiting hours for pictures)
 - ▼ **E**ase of use (good navigation and asking the where am I questions?)
 - ▼ **R**elevant to users (is your site satisfying, efficient, effective?)
 - ▼ **U**nique to on-line forum (is it designed for the web – not just old stuff uploaded and not adapted to the nature of web browsing)
 - ▼ **N**et-centric cooperate culture (is your site more than just a glossy brochure?)

Related checklists

- ▼ A guide to usability tools and techniques
- ▼ Guidelines to ensure website accessibility
- ▼ Defining and supporting usability and accessibility objectives with software
- ▼ Managing and increasing ROI in your website

Useful reading

‘Don’t make me think’, Steven Krug, New Riders, Indianapolis, 2000

<http://www.w3.org>, World Wide Web Consortium

<http://www.useit.com>, Jakob Nielsen

“Criteria for optimal web design (designing for usability)”, Michael Bernard,
<http://psychology.wichita.edu/optimalweb/default.htm>

Useful addresses

Management Information Centre, Institute of Management, Management House, Cottingham Road, Corby,
 Northants, NN17 1TT
 Tel: 01536 204222

Thought starters

- ▼ Think about the frustrations you have had with different websites? How could these sites be improved?
- ▼ Look at award winning websites (e.g. BBC) and ones you enjoy using. What do these sites do that make them so successful? Why do you enjoy using them? Identify the good usability aspects in them
- ▼ Is there something you want to do which breaks these rules? Will what you do still be usable?

Further information

To be added by editor.