

Website Usability

by John Ragosta

Usability addresses the relationship between tools and their users. A website is a tool. In order for a website to be effective, it must allow intended users to accomplish their tasks in the best way possible. If the Home page fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people leave. If users get lost on a website, they leave. If a website's information is hard to read or doesn't answer users' key questions, they leave. Note a pattern here? There's no such thing as a user reading a website manual or otherwise spending much time trying to figure out an interface. There are plenty of other websites available; leaving is the first line of defense when users encounter a difficulty.

The fundamental organizing principle in website design is meeting users' needs. Ask yourself what your audience wants, and center your website design around their needs. A website must allow users to accomplish their tasks in the best possible way. Most readers won't care how your company is organized, make the items and services they want the most prominent items on the home page. Cognitive psychologists have known for decades that most people can hold only about four to seven discrete chunks of information in short-term memory. Smaller, discrete units of information are more functional and easier to handle than long, undifferentiated tracks.

There are five basic steps in organizing information:

1. Divide content into logical units
2. Establish a hierarchy of importance among the units.
3. Use the hierarchy to structure relations among units
4. Build a site that closely follows your information structure.
5. Analyze the functional and aesthetic success of your site.

Some counter-intuitive findings include that users are more successful at following longer, more descriptive text links than shorter, less informative ones; navigational graphics aren't helpful because users explore text links first and don't wait for graphical links to download; users shun nonstop animations; however, they will gladly wait to download informational graphics, such as a picture of a new car model.

Also, convention says that users hate to scroll beyond the "fold" (the bottom of the screen), but the testing found it made no difference whatsoever.

Another revelation will come as an unwelcome bit of news to some Web builders. The sites that employed the increasingly popular "shell" strategy construction -- in which programmers create a generic site structure and navigational hierarchy, and others plug in content later -- confused users. Shell or template sites do not work because the links are so generic, users rarely get what they expect.

Organizing your website hierarchically is a necessity. Move from the most general overview of the website, the Home Page, down through increasingly specific submenus and content pages. Users create mental models of a website. They use these models to assess relations among topics and to guess where to find information they haven't seen before. The success of the organization of your website will be determined largely by how well your site matches your users' expectations. A logical site organization allows users to make successful predictions about where to find things.



If your idea of how one section of your website relates to the other areas is hazy, if you have no

comprehensive narrative or clear sense of organization, your readers will know it soon enough and most will leave in pursuit of better material.

A site map is a major navigational tool. It gives users an overview of the organization of content and narrative flow of your presentation.

In summary, organize your information. Think about what you want to say and how you want to say it. Organize your site hierarchically moving from general to specific information. Organizing your website logically will require that you become intimately acquainted with your site content.