

Top Usability
Unique Advantage Services

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Usability : Healthcheck

Basic evaluation for site :

www.SITENAME.com

1 Introduction

The importance of Usability

The ever increasing volume of business completed over the internet is rapidly causing the nature of competition and competitive advantage among businesses to be redefined. Traditional differentiators such as placement, merchandising, staff approach, location, access, shopfitting and identity have no direct relevance on the web.

Some aspects of branding can successfully be carried through to a web presence, but customer perception, trust, and willingness to trade with you, is largely determined by the effectiveness of your web site and the way it communicates with the user.

This is recognised in the large investment frequently made in the provision of sophisticated graphic presentation and complex site design.

However, user research and a vast body of evidence now suggests that the bigger and more significant determinant of a client's willingness to interact on a site, is not the glitz or sophistication, but the extent to which they can intuitively and with confidence complete their desired tasks quickly and comfortably.

Essentially, sites which are sensitive to the wants, needs, abilities and expectations of their (specific) target users and are designed for Ease of Use of that audience are much more likely to succeed. This should be no surprise, though we only need to reflect on our own experience to discover what rarities such sites are.

The failure of the majority of sites to exhibit high Usability and delighted visitors, stems from the problem that:-

- 1) the designers understand the technology and consequently are unable to view the site in the manner of a normal user
- 2) the site owner – who provides the design brief, knows his offerings, intentions and ideas over how the site should work

..... even if communication and co-operation between them is first rate – neither can see the site from the viewpoint of a “naive” user without any foreknowledge. Consequently even on a well designed site, assumptions are made over user perception, understanding and behaviour, leading to results which confuse, annoy and alienate users. At that point your nearest competitor is only a key click away and your customer is gone forever!

Usability, is a specialist area of expertise concerned with the design of systems, interfaces and websites, to ensure target users can accomplish their objectives with **Effectiveness**, **Efficiency** and **Satisfaction**. This means that whatever the intended task (find information, make purchase, progress an order etc.) your customer can achieve it **fully** and **accurately**, **quickly** and **easily** and in a way that is **pleasing** not frustrating, - that creates customer satisfaction, a strong buying motive and a loyal user.

2 Observations : SITENAME.com

General

Observations were conducted on the site between 6th and 9th November. Access was checked from multiple platforms. Connection speeds rated at xxxx Mbps were utilised for majority of connections, reflecting the predominant access conditions for typical home and small business users in the UK. No specific timing data (eg time of day delays etc) is included in the basic report though any serious observable delays would be reported – none were experienced.

Screen sizing and construction

The screen presentation is set up to assume vertical scrolling will be required but precluding the need for horizontal scrolling. This is successful at 800x600 and above consistent with currently assumed minimum equipment.

Navigation

The graphics on the home page take up the majority of the vertical screen area at 1024x728 allowing the 2 text paragraphs and Register / Sign title bar to be seen without scrolling, however at 800x600 only the first line of the first welcome paragraph is visible. This means that almost no key information is displayed without scrolling.

On home page - Sign in/ Register placement require scrolling to access – returning visitors likely to prefer immediate access to sign in without scrolling

Low placement of Register/ Sign in elements on home page allows users to speculatively use the left menu frame which leads them to a dead end until registered [on later observations after our discussion – the somewhat dismissive warning message had been removed.

Rollover of top menu (special offers etc) displays only the same as the section heading. Whilst useful for “text readers” for the visually impaired, these messages could be used to greater advantage to explain each section.

Once, in any of the sections under the top menu (special offers etc...) the option to navigate to Gift guide disappears in all sections but “gift guide”.

Expecting the above item - Navigation from within the guide sections and pages is simple and logical. Home is well signposted, as is View all Categories.

The bottom menu line (only visible through scrolling) has fairly typical information types and would be a likely place to search. The existence of the “key” to symbols in this region is less effective. When an unfamiliar user needs the key from the listings – nothing is visible or suggests where to look.

Functionality

Site purpose is to guide visitors to subscribe to the service.

The proposition is the addition of great value to busy users (predominantly A/ B women), by maintaining high relevance portal to good quality retail sites and to provide and promote special offers to the subscribed marketplace. Further value elements like gift guide and “personal shopper” are available to members.

Value proposition of site is not the major focus of the home page (two paragraphs) about half the real estate afforded the graphics or the left menu frame. This seems inconsistent with the immediate offer (call to action) to Register, as I have little information to judge the nature or value of the proposition.

The route through to registration (even when the value case is made) – features a rather intimidating screen at transition to the secure server. Text reflects technical issue ‘encryption’ with no explanation of user benefit and central placement of Media Code entry box suggests it to be important. Unless they assume that not having a code is OK (the text does say “If”), some may be confused. This screen appears quite hostile and marks a transition from the look and feel of the rest of the site – I suspect many users will back out or leave from this point.

Perception

Impact of the Home page is professional, glossy and good quality.

The featured graphics though attractive and “glossy” dominate presenting 3 issues

1. The emphasis appears to be product focused with the left menu of categories, and the visuals – almost suggesting a sales site
2. The key site proposition and value is only discernable from the two text paragraphs both of which are concealed on smaller screen sizes, without scrolling
3. “what does this site do for me” / “site mission” questions are given lower focus than the pictures

“SITENAME.com” logo visually strong but is presented 1) as logo (top left), 2) central (in graphic) and in 3) in Welcome to ... The 3rd repeat is unnecessary adding no value. Removal would also allow reduction of size of “welcome title” increasing the real estate for the site proposition.

The scrolling offers “sign” high on home page is a distraction, on faster processors it also goes too quickly to be easily readable (though it does stop on rollover). This feature is unnecessary and is likely to irritate rather than attract users.

Colour selections are clear with good contrast, grey tones appear professional and are satisfyingly neutral.

General layout is effective/ selected fonts clear (I would adjust the spacing on the text paragraphs on the home page to really make the key message and benefits easy to read)

The graphics on the section screens and in the listing pages, do take some time to load. Using the site at an off peak time and knowing that your big user expansion is still to come I was seeing text appear in about 3 seconds – and the graphics building in up to 16 seconds. Frustration is countered by the visibility and clickability of text items in advance of the graphics – though it may be worth exploring if the resolution (and thus download time) of the graphics could be reduced without detriment to the visual impact & appeal.

Controls

Preview option and control is highly relevant to first time visitors and yet is small and hidden from view without scrolling.

Register and sign-on placement not visible for 800x600 screens, partially visible on larger screens. This is mentioned also in navigation – though its importance as a control issue is significant as without visibility – the user is likely to try other and inappropriate options.

Search engine placement is not typical, and is out of initial view for 800x600 screens.

Basic layout is clear and logical.

Menu items and structure appear

I have a small concern which may affect a small number of less experienced web users. The choice to open “click through” sites in a separate window means that, should a user return to “SITENAME” without closing the destination window – clicking a further site will reuse the previous site window without making it current (thus appearing that the command hasn’t worked). This prejudices a fundamental need for controls to demonstrate feedback – though this is not specifically a site design limitation.

Summary / Recommendations

The limited scope of the Healthcheck normally precludes our making any detailed recommendations within this report, however following our conversations I thought you might appreciate the following.

1) Interim

TEXT OF INTERIM e-MAIL xxxxxxxx

Initial thoughts

Home Page

First sight - The site looks good - (which you already know), visually appealing.

Concern - The central value proposition of the site and thus the value of the subscription is confined to the two text paragraphs which are reduced in impact by the dominant graphic. More detail in the report.

Navigation - Left menu bar leads up a blind alley till registered - frustrating for the many who wont read the details lower down the home page

Following the registration path - Thinking as a user I'm not sure I had initially got enough sense of your added value to persuade me to part with my money yet. The secure server / encryption warning looks quite intimidating and is discontinuous with the feel of the site - 1st time users arriving here, particularly directly from home page are likely to back out "I don't know if I'm ready to commit to something yet" Compare this with the much gentler, form based transition on the gift guide - smoother, still feels to be part of the same experience.

Preview option (suggests - try before you buy - we know we add value - we're confident of our proposition),
is very small and invisible to most visitors without scrolling.

I know I said I don't make recommendations on the basic packagebut you might consider

- 1) Visitors need to be immediately aware of the nature & value of your proposition.
(eg We take the headache and time out of searching for the things YOU really want !)
- 2) If you're confident of the value, then let them experience it - make the preview facility obvious
- 3) Let them become committed to the proposition before leading them through the slightly intimidating step to the secure server.

2) First Time visitors

It is important to remember that the impression and effectiveness of the homepage should be tuned and optimised to the first-time visitor. Returning visitors and subscribers will have already gained insight and some understanding of how to progress so, though they still need to be fully considered, the success of the site will depend upon capturing the attention and desire of the first time visitor.

This is why I stress the importance of packaging the central mission and proposition of the site – plus value and special incentives – right up on the homepage, even at the expense of material more relevant to returning clients.

Ensure that the specific interests of the first time visitor are met – how to, what do you require, how can we help, we understand your needs, etc., once they know the ropes they won't need handholding – but handholding now can bring them on board.

3) Registration/ Subscription/ membership

You may wish to consider choices between these terms. Whichever is chosen it should be used consistently throughout the site.

Subscription clearly implies a cost – registration and membership less so.

Membership conveys belonging, and anticipates some benefits of being part of something. Using Membership also provides future flexibility for different levels of membership.

Registration has a simple implication of “signing up” though like membership can be moderated/ modified by terms like “free”, “temporary”, “guest”.

Clearly, you know your market best – but getting this right can be extremely important in making the proposition feel attractive and desirable.

4) After joining ...

Just as a final thought, after registration when the user comes back to use the service – there is almost nothing to differentiate the experience other than the fact that you can now get to the listings. Though the listings are the central purpose of the site the experience is almost identical post investment, especially if they did the preview.

Just wonder if you might consider any way to alter the feel to highlight the fact that they have “changed in status” for spending their money.
