



"Click.... Click.... Back... Back... Click... Back... Back... Back..... Expletive!... Where am I....?"

These are not the incoherent ramblings of a drunkard, but a typical transcript of the experience of so many web users. Muddled web sites are the bane of potential customers, yet usability seems to be an afterthought in the design process.

Does an improved web site experience increase traffic and commerce? Apparently so, according to the independent research firm MediaMetrix, which measures Web traffic. Since its relaunch, Staples.com has ranked first in the office-supply industry in unique daily visitors. When the Christmas shopping season began (2001), the average e-commerce site had a 40% increase in unique daily visitors, but Staples.com had a 79.7% increase, the second best in the world for any category of site.

Most impressively, the site had 300,000 repeat customers in the third quarter of 2001, as compared to 180,000 in the second quarter. "This 67% jump speaks to the increased *stickiness* of site and the positive experience of a customer the first time through," says Colin Hynes, Director of Site Usability at Staples.com.

In simple terms it means that if your site is easy to use, and your audience feel comfortable there, you have the base ingredients to make the perfect 'sticky' web site. How do we ensure that sites are warm, comfortable places for our audience to do business? Fluffy 'character' guides, perhaps?

Or perhaps not. (Have you ever tried to strangle the "I see you are writing a letter pop-up safety clip character"?)

In fact the user feels more comfortable when engaging a logical interface with relevant information at their fingertips and a constant site location indicator. 'But that's just common sense'. Of course it is, but we've all experienced the single click that launches dozens of new windows and instigates a tactical strike on a small remote republic.

As it happens, the idea of usability in web design is a relatively new one. Not every design agency that preaches user-centred design actually practices it. There are a number of tools that allow designers and analysts to locate where the user is most likely to make errors, how severe the error is and whether it can be rectified. A site's architecture can be transformed from a mess into a streamlined sales and marketing tool.

It may not be practicable to redesign a web site from scratch. However, there is no reason to forget about usability. A simple analysis can provide valuable insight into the user's experience of the site, and the results can be accommodated when the site is next refreshed.

Other key site performance factors

SUCCESS

1. Introduce yourself - say who you are, give credentials
2. Make a good impression - look professional
3. Bin the spin - don't use hype
4. Deliver on time - make sure you do what you say you will
5. Respect people's privacy - make clear how information is used
6. Make customers feel secure - explain online security
7. Stay on top of things - get feedback, watch competition and update regularly

FAILURE

1. Poor design and navigation
2. Unintelligible content
3. Slow or crash-prone sites
4. No company information
5. Sketchy product information

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