



# ExperienceLab

Design guidelines | Digital music services

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## Summary

This document presents a summary of the key findings of a piece of independent research into the user experience of digital music services. A copy of the complete report can be found at [www.serco.com/expericnelab](http://www.serco.com/expericnelab).

## Guidelines

### General

The research looked at four of the leading suppliers of digital music services in the UK: iTunes, Spotify, Last.fm, and Nokia Music. They offer a range of services including downloads; streaming; song, artist and event recommendations; methods of organising a digital library; methods of sharing music and musical tastes; and integration with mobile technology.

- Provide consistent, well labelled controls to access common actions from different parts of an interface
  - If a control cannot be used in a particular situation, greying or fading out that control helps users to understand what can be done where and when
  - Mouse-over text helps users to understand the function of each control

### Downloading

*Most online music services provide some method of downloading songs. Once a song has been downloaded it is stored on a user's computer and, subject to Digital Rights Management (DRM) restrictions, can be transferred to portable devices, burnt to CD, shared and played.*

#### *Finding songs*

- Provide a consistently located search box that is available from all parts of the interface
- Ensure that users can look for search terms within specific fields (e.g., Artist and Title)
  - This can be done using pre-search advanced options or post-search results filters
- Where more than one type of content is available (e.g., Music and Video) ensure that users can look for specific types of content
- Present search results in a list that can be sorted according to a variety of fields (e.g., Artist, album, genre etc.)
- Keep the vertical space used by each result to a minimum in order to fit as many results on to a page as possible
- Ensure that users can browse through the catalogue by genre
  - This provides a good opportunity to promote chart items and compilations

### **Buying songs**

- Ensure that a customer's credit level is visible at all times while browsing the store
  - If credit is unlimited this should also be shown
- Provide a clear call to action so that if a customer wants to download a song they know how it is done
- Ensure that the point of commitment is clear when purchasing a song

### **Digital Rights Management (DRM)**

- If songs are subject to DRM restrictions, ensure that the customer is made aware of the restrictions at the time of purchase
- Ensure that DRM related error messages can be understood and provide clear instructions as how to resolve problems

## **Streaming**

*Streaming allows users to listen to music without owning the file, but requires a permanent connection to the internet. Access to streamed content is often free, but is sometimes provided on a subscription basis. Where streaming is provided free it is usually subject to conditions*

### **Selecting and queuing songs**

- Make clear which items can be streamed and which items cannot.
- A clear call to action for selecting a song for streaming is advised
  - Especially if streaming is one of several actions (e.g., as well as downloading or listening to a preview)
- If multiple songs (e.g., an album) can be selected for streaming using only one control, ensure that the number of songs that will be added to the queue is clear
- If songs can be queued, provide clear feedback that a song has been added to the queue
- Consider showing the song currently playing at the top of the queue with upcoming songs below
  - The Playlist metaphor (i.e., a list of songs with the current song moving down the list) is less effective for a queue of streamed songs

### **Radio style streaming**

- If Radio style streaming is to be supported alongside Queue style streaming ensure that the interaction between the two streams is clear and intuitive
- If streaming is supported from within a user's browser, where possible ensure that a user is notified before taking an action that will end the stream
  - E.g., "Navigating away from this page will stop playback"

## Organising

*Online music services often provide some means of organising a digital library. This works well as a way of keeping users within the provider's environment for all of their music related activities. If a user is listening to music on the iTunes Jukebox and decides to download some new songs, they are likely to go to the iTunes Store which is one click away.*

### **Metadata**

- Ensure that metadata in songs which are available to download is accurate and complete
- If a library manager application is provided, ensure that it can find and update metadata for imported songs
  - Provide some method of allowing users to edit metadata manually

### **Searching, grouping and sorting**

- Limit grouping and sorting behaviour to a few well implemented options
  - This does not necessarily mean restricting which meta tags can be used to sort
- Providing too many options can lead to a confusing and frustrating library manager
  - Be careful with options that allow sorting based on multiple tags
  - Be careful with dynamic groupings based on items within a tag field

### **Playlists**

- Playlists are a useful feature of music services, and should be implemented if possible
- Provide multiple methods of creating new playlists and adding songs to existing playlists
  - Quick links and context menus work best for creating playlists
  - Context menus and Drag-and-Drop work best for adding songs
  - Small menu icons repeated throughout a service's environment work well as a web based alternative to right click context menus
- Automatic playlists add value to a service
  - Songs in automatic playlists should be appropriate for the criteria selected

### **Love and Ratings**

- Allowing users to provide input about the songs they listen to encourages them to engage with a service
- Ratings should be useful, e.g., support grouping, sorting, playlist or recommendation features

## Discovering

*Online music services use the information they collect about users' libraries and listening habits to make artist, song and event recommendations. This adds value to the user's listening experience by introducing them to new music. It also provides an opportunity to promote songs and artists.*

### *General*

- Recommendation features should focus on making appropriate suggestions
  - They can also be useful marketing tools

### *Song based recommendations*

- Recommendations should be easy to find without being intrusive to the user's experience
  - Keeping the location of recommendations consistent is advisable
- If a user needs to intervene to generate recommendations, a clear call to action should be provided
- Clickable Tags work well as a way of presenting recommendations in an engaging way
  - They work as a call to action, encouraging users to explore the recommendations

### *Library based recommendations*

- If a user's entire library is to be used as the basis for recommendations, think carefully about how 'seed' items will be selected
  - Indicators of listening habits (e.g., Play count) work well as a guide for which items within a library are appropriate seeds for recommendations

## Sharing

*Online music services often allow users to share music and musical tastes with each other. The services tested offered offer a wide range of features including allowing people to play songs in each other's libraries, share playlists, and build collaborative playlists, as well as supporting integration with social networking sites.*

### *General*

- The ability to share music and musical tastes adds value to a service and should be supported if possible

### *Sharing a library*

- If a library can be shared, the set up process should be minimal
  - Privacy settings should be provided to manage access to shared content

### *Sharing songs and playlists*

- If songs and playlists can be shared, it is advisable to support sharing with people who are not current service users
  - This encourages existing users to introduce new users through word of mouth

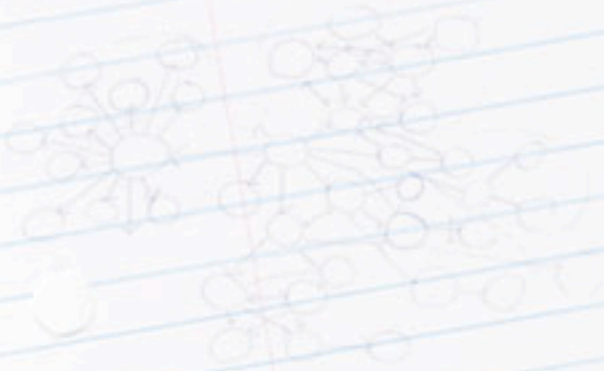
- Integration with e-mail and social networking sites is a good way to support sharing behaviour
  - Context menus work well for social networking integration; Drag-and-Drop works well to support sharing by e-mail.

### ***About ExperienceLab***

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

Why not visit the ExperienceLab blog ([www.experiencelab.info](http://www.experiencelab.info)), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.



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