

Undercover Heuristics

By Andrew Swartz, (first published 15 September 2004, UsabilityNews.com)

Usability people love heuristics, the rules of thumb used for expert evaluations and to guide design activities. There are thousands of heuristics on the web to evaluate everything from word processing programs to handheld gadgets. They range from well researched and insightful to callow and useless.

A major London newspaper recently asked us for background information they could use to evaluate some popular websites. We wanted to acknowledge that most professional websites already handle the basics from well-established heuristics pretty well. So instead, we focused on the ten issues we most often see that prevent websites from succeeding. Here they are. If you are responsible for a website, we also list a fast test for each item that you can use to see how your website does.

Content, content, content

Usability evaluations by their nature tend to focus on the form of websites – the navigation systems, the layout, the basic behaviours –, but it is important to remember that just as high street shops aren't just about the organisation of the aisles and the quality of the lighting, websites aren't just about navigation and orientation. They are fundamentally about their core offerings. The BBC is a good, usable website, but what makes it a success is that it also has a wondrous amount of information and entertainment on offer, much of it that you can't get elsewhere. The test: Does the site offer something you and the people you know would go out of your way to find?

Searching

Users love the idea of a Search function on websites, and they have such high expectations of its power that they are easily disappointed. If a site has a prominent Search function, users will try it. But most sites use simplistic search rules, and risible relevancy rankings, as if you asked a grocery store employee where the salt was and were first taken to the baked beans because they contain salt. The test: search for something you know is on the site using common everyday words. Did the most sensible item come first?

Accessibility for the rest of us

A lot has been written about accessibility for the blind, and that is important. But while many sites laudably focus on complex technical requirements for screen reader software, they often overlook the accessibility issue that affects the greatest number of people: the huge numbers of over-40s who are becoming short-sighted. They don't allow the user to easily change the font size displayed in their browser. The test: In Internet Explorer, choose View > Text Size > Largest to see if the font size increases and the site is still legible.

Printing

Many sites make printing quite difficult, so that if a user does what comes most naturally to print a page, the pages come off with the right margin truncated. The test: in Internet Explorer, choose File > Print and see how it prints. (Some sites work around this by offering a special 'Printable View'. This is acceptable, but second best.)

Seductive beauty

Too many usability specialists say that usability works in opposition to aesthetics, and give top marks only to plain sites. In our studies, we see time and again that beautiful sites inspire users to stick around and try things they might not otherwise bother with. It is possible to overdo an artsy look, but it is possible to be too plain as well. (See <http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article1415.asp> for a story about looks and functionality.) The test: Look at the site as you would a magazine page layout. Is it as attractive as a good two-page spread in a high-quality magazine?

Innovation in the right places

Creative design teams are always looking for innovative ways to address the needs and desires of their web audiences, and they often delight the users with a clever novelty on a site. But just as often we see innovation where it isn't appreciated. Users typically don't like new kinds of scroll bars, page elements that fly away from them, or weird typography (although I can think of exceptions to each of these). The test: See if the website has at least one innovative interface element, and make sure it doesn't throw you off your stride when you're trying to use the site.

Stand out or fit in

Most users won't admit it, but they tend to be a conservative bunch in their web expectations. Every website genre, whether financial, governmental, shopping, informational, or entertainment, has its own look. We have studied government websites that users didn't trust because they looked too slick, or too commercial. We don't necessarily recommend that every site walk lockstep with every other site in its genre, but (to stretch the metaphor) if a site is going to break ranks it better have a clear direction in mind. The test: Compare a site to others in its class. At first glance, does it appear to fit in? If not, is the different look consistent with the brand message the site's owner is trying to project?

Management of attention

The most common error we see on websites is that they have too many things vying for the user's attention at once, and as a result the user pays attention to none of them. The test: In the main rectangle on the page, the one containing the key content, there should be only the content the user wants plus at most three other major choices. (See <http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article1528.asp>)

The fine print

A lot of websites have many things they need to include for legal reasons and to support their Data Protection Act requirements. Users have a fine sense of when someone is trying to hide something in these. The test: Look at a site's terms and conditions. If they have a large amount of text in a tiny scrolling field, users may sense someone is trying to pull one over on them.

Scannability

Until they get to the specific article or bit of information they are looking for, most people don't read web pages -- they scan them very quickly, and this requires a careful writing style. The test: Go

to any page that doesn't contain a main article. Read only the headline text, and bullets that are one or two lines long, and link text. Do you understand what the page is for?

Those are our top ten quick checks to make sure your website will succeed. If you have other ideas based on your experiences, we'd love to hear them. Write to me at the address below, and if we receive enough interesting ones, we'll make a column of them, of course sharing credit with the contributors.

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.expericelab.info), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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