

Usability for Evil

By Andrew Swartz, (first published 16 December 2004, UsabilityNews.com)

Put away those goody two-shows and don your red cape, devil horns, and pitchfork. Turn Superman's picture to the wall and set out the bust of Lex Luther. Switch off David Dimbleby and switch over to Ant and Dec.

We who work on usability issues are usually on the side of the angels, and so we should be, but sometimes we can learn more by looking at the other side. The most compelling text I've ever seen to teach you how to do statistics well is *How to Lie with Statistics*, and the most fascinating book on engineering is *Why Buildings Fall Down*. Not only are they fun to read, but you'll walk away having learnt a lot.

So here, tongue firmly in cheek, are our top recommendations for Usability For Evil.

Advertise free items and then hide them

Offer a popular free tool. Run a huge advertising campaign involving word-of-mouth and partnership marketing. But then once users arrive at your website, make your premium product available with a single click, and require five hard-to-find clicks to get to the free version.

Discourage the reading of important text

Does your company have unpleasant or unfair terms and conditions? Easily fixed: use small fonts, use a tiny scrolling field, type in all caps, and reduce contrast. Place the text below the fold. Use no bold face or formatting, no bullets or numbers. Require horizontal scrolling. Don't have time for that? Just make the text so long and only one in a million will bother.

Hide bad news until users lose the will to live

Does your business plan rely on cheap products with improbably high shipping fees, by all means delay telling users about the shipping fees until they have already devoted an hour-and-a-half to placing the order.

Employ users' own physiology against them

Users pay attention to only a scant portion of every page. Want to hide something from them? Place it outside the Rectangle of Interest (Xref to <http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article1528.asp>), make it look like a banner ad, or simply require the user to scroll.

Deception by search engine

Place the entire contents of the Oxford English Dictionary on your page in white-on-white text, so users are pleasantly surprised by the serendipity of finding your site selling edible pants when they thought they were searching for a new pair of crutches for their nephew Tiny Tim. Otherwise, redirect all clicks from search engines away from specific pages back to your home page, allowing users the pleasure of guessing how to get back to the page they wanted.

Trick to click

If all else fails, you can resort to frank deception. Make a link to your site look like an innocuous dialog box. Everyone loves surprises. These tricks work. At least for a while. Beware they may have unexpected side effects: Your users will hate you. They will leave you as soon as a better option becomes available.

And you'll get coal in your stocking at Christmas.

Interested in taking a course in Usability For Evil, a light-hearted course that uses bad examples to teach good practice? Send me an e-mail at andrew.swartz@serco.com.

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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