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Common website design blunders

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In 2002, a study conducted in England revealed that 70 per cent of people admitted to shouting, swearing at or generally acting violently towards their computer. One restaurant manager got so mad at his laptop that he threw it in the deep fryer, ruining both the laptop and the deep fryer.

Aren't computers supposed to make our lives easier and less stressful?

Unfortunately, using the Internet can be just as frustrating and time-consuming. No one wants to waste their precious time fighting with websites. While website design has come a long way in the past five years, there are still many basic mistakes that sites make.

In the last 18 months Optimal Usability has evaluated the websites of more than 140 New Zealand organisations. Evaluations typically involve observing real users as they perform common tasks on a website. Our observations show us what frustrates, confuses and annoys website users. Design problems are often very similar, regardless of the industry or type of website. We repeatedly see the same website design mistakes – most of which are easily corrected.

Top 10 mistakes

The top 10 mistakes in order of importance are:

1. Poor categorisation and labelling of information

Problems with site structure and the names of the main categories are among the most damaging problems for a website. Websites will ultimately fail if users cannot find the information they seek. The structure and labelling of the website should match the language and concepts that users are familiar with.

For example, the Pumpkin Patch website has "Shopping" and "Product Guide" categories – neither of which actually shows the range of kids clothing that they have for sale. Too often websites



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reflect the internal structure and labels used by the organisation rather than those of their customers.

2. Poor navigation design

Even if a site is well organised and information is in clearly labelled categories, the design of the navigation elements can undo all the good work. Navigation design incorporates things like the left and top navigation bars, and footer links. The trouble is that:

- people are often unsure of where they are within the website's overall structure;
- sub-pages within the site are not linked to from the navigation bars;
- it is difficult for people to tell where they have been on the site, as previously visited links are not differentiated from links the user is yet to visit;
- navigation options are difficult to scan because of verbose link labels and cluttered placement.

3. Cluttered page layout

Many pages are difficult for users to scan because the design is cluttered; information isn't aligned and there is too much unused space; the most important information on a page isn't clear at a glance; and few pages make effective use of section headings and sub-headings so that it is obvious how the information on a page is structured.

Furthermore, many sites display text as graphics, which is almost always a bad idea because it makes the text harder to read. Website designers should also consider that people with poor vision may need to access their site using software that enlarges the screen elements, making images pixelated and difficult to read.

4. Inconsistencies with web design conventions

People spend most of their time at other sites. That's why it's crucial that your site follows standard design conventions and behaves as visitors would expect. Inconsistencies will make your site harder to use and less intuitive. Unless there is a very good business case for *not* doing so, you should take advantage of conventions. Every site should have:

- a search box on every page
- the organisation's logo in the top left, linked to the home page
- a textual link to home
- standard labels such as "About Us" and "Contact Us".

5. Too little content

It is amazing how little thought goes into understanding who website users are and why they are using the site. Many sites leave the most basic questions unanswered. People want content that helps them answer questions and make decisions. Users rarely visit a site to read what you have to say about yourself.

For example, a luxury lodge website we worked on did not tell visitors how many people could stay at the lodge at one time, or whether they could bring their own food.

6. Too much content

While too little content can be a problem, we more often hear complaints about too much content. Users balk at the idea of reading long pages of text online. People want the most important information first, and to scan and read concise information. Overseas research has shown that people read up to 25 percent slower from a computer screen than they do from paper. Our own experience supports this – at ACC, for example, people preferred pictures and diagrams over words to illustrate injury-prevention principles.

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7. Poor use of links

The Internet used to have a very simple instruction manual: if it's blue and underlined, click on it. Nowadays the look of links has changed somewhat, but the basic behaviour holds true. People move around by clicking on things. The problems occur when:

- **It is not obvious what a user can and can't click.** This makes it very difficult to move around a site. Often images look as though they are clickable when they're not. It should always be clear what people can click on.
- **Links lead to unexpected document downloads.** People are not always warned when they are about to download non-HTML web content, such as Excel spreadsheets or PDF documents. This can be particularly frustrating for people on slower Internet connections who are then forced to wait for the download.
- **Links lead back to the current page.** In one project, we found that a whopping eight percent of all visitors were inadvertently clicking on links that reloaded the page that they were already on. This disoriented many people, who did not realise that nothing had happened.
- **Not enough cross-linking.** Many site designers seem to forget the goals that people have in visiting the site, and neglect to link useful pieces of information together. For instance, many university sites don't link their subjects pages to timetable details, fees, required books or prerequisite papers.

8. Poorly implemented forms

Most organisations now offer more than just information, with some level of interactivity on most sites. Online forms are the principal way that sites provide interactivity and are essential for shopping online, getting customer feedback and signing up for online newsletters. Despite their popularity, most forms still make the following basic mistakes:

- compulsory fields are not highlighted;
- users aren't given instructions on how to enter dates and phone numbers in the correct format;
- entered information is not saved until the form is complete – forcing users to re-enter all information if they make a mistake;
- error messages are unclear, technical, and sometimes just plain rude;
- reasons for providing sensitive personal information are not explained.

One financial website we tested asked visitors to give their name, date of birth and employment details for a supposedly anonymous online insurance quote. People unfamiliar with how insurance is calculated may have felt uncomfortable providing such personal details without knowing how the information would be used. The form should have explained why personal information was required and how the information would be used and kept confidential.

On the same site, once the quote was provided, website users could purchase the quoted insurance. When they clicked "Apply Now" they had to re-enter exactly the same information that they had just entered to get the quote in the first place.

It is particularly important that websites don't introduce barriers when users are obviously willing to make a purchase.

9. Poorly written error messages

Error messages occur when the system causes the user to make a mistake. An ideal website prevents people from making mistakes in the first place. At the very least, a website should help users to diagnose and recover from errors. Instead we find error messages that, rather than being helpful, tend to be terse and impolite. Messages are filled with obscure jargon, vague phrases and inconsistencies. People become frustrated when error messages don't tell what went wrong or how to proceed.

10. Poorly implemented search

Many people browse for information on a website and use search engines only as a last resort. Your search engine needs to be bullet-proof, or you risk irritating already exasperated users.

Poor search functionality regularly causes people to abandon sites having not found what they were looking for. Mistakes made in search engines are:

- Search results are not ordered by relevancy. People very seldom go past the first page of results, so the most important results must be first.
- Result titles are not unique or clearly written so people can't quickly scan the results list to spot items of interest.

Title	Date
1. Make Me a Man	10-01-2000
2. Best Remotely Fed rats	11-01-2000
3. What's the up for 2000 Parents Who Fed	28-08-2000
4. 400Pounds (2), 400Lbs (2), 400Pounds (2) - Last List Of Things Who	18-07-2000
5. The Good Circle	28-05-2000
6. 10 1 Study Check Failure In Arrested Film	23-06-2000
7. Excessives wanted for US film	18-08-2000
8. Super Fed Enter Than Before	06-07-2000
9. Dances/How Level 2 new series	23-04-2000
10. Summary: Stand-Ins Against Criminals Program	08-02-2000
11. Short, Not Not Necessary Short	09-01-2000
12. Director Film	03-09-2000
13. Letter to appeal 20 year sentence	01-05-2000

- Results summaries don't accurately summarise the content of each search hit.
- Results often contain superfluous details such as relevancy percentages and the date a page was last updated. This makes it harder for people to scan the page to find the information they do want.
- Search engines can be unforgiving of spelling mistakes and synonyms.

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Users regularly misspell words because they have difficulty with spelling, hit the wrong key or are looking for a technical term. People search websites using language that is familiar to them, which may be inconsistent with the site's terminology.

For example, searching for "films" at the TVNZ website reveals some basic mistakes. The search results aren't accompanied by summaries so it's hard to tell how the results have been ordered. For example, why is "Corby to appeal 20-year sentence" the 13th result when searching for "films"? It is also hard to know what you'd get when you click on generic hits such as *Make Me A Man* or *Short, But Not Necessarily Black* when no summaries are available. Searching for "movies" and "films" also gives two completely different sets of results.

Top 3 usability recommendations

With these mistakes in mind, we have come up with three main recommendations for creating a useful and easy-to-use website:

1. Be consistent

Many people expect web design elements to behave in a certain way when they visit a new site, simply because that's how things usually work. Take advantage of these conventions. Link to the home page in the upper left corner of each page. If you have search functionality, put a search box at the top of every page. Change the colour of visited links. Be internally consistent with how navigation mechanisms are designed, and how information, links, buttons and other visual elements are displayed.

2. Provide concise, goal-driven content

Most people will visit your website for a reason – they want to find information. Present the most important information first, and ensure that it is concise and easy to understand. Ensure that the important things are more visually prominent and things that are related logically are also related visually.

Group information into manageable chunks for reading on-screen and use meaningful sub-headings, bulleted lists and bold keywords. Don't hide information deep in the site – reveal it at the earliest available opportunity.

Most people tend to scan web pages, so ensure that links are descriptive, and make sense even when read outside the context of the rest of the page.

3. Design for way-finding

People often become disorientated when they move throughout a website. At every page it should be obvious to visitors where they are, where they can go and where they've been. Visual cues such as colours, typography, icons and labels help users to understand their location and navigate through the website.

The user's current location should be highlighted in the navigation bars. Avoid creating links to the current page.

The bottom line

- ▣ Increased competition on the Internet will lead to increased demand for usability.
- ▣ Users simply will not put up with sites that are hard to use. They will just click away from websites that frustrate and annoy them.
- ▣ The upside is that creating an easy-to-use website is relatively easy to do and will give you a valuable competitive advantage.

About the contributor:

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