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Usability and User Experience
A Beginner's Guide

E-consultancy

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About E-consultancy

E-consultancy is an award-winning online publisher of best practice internet marketing reports, timesaving research and how-to guides, aimed at internet professionals that want practical advice on all aspects of e-business.

Privately-funded and with a successful paid-subscription business model, the London-based company is growing fast and now employs around 30 full time staff. The site now attracts 175,000 unique users per month, while more than 65,000 internet professionals have created user profiles on E-consultancy.

E-consultancy also operates an Events division and a highly popular Training division, used by some of the world's most prominent brands for staff education (both in-house or via public courses). It hosts more than 100 events a year, such as The Online Marketing Masterclasses, regular Supplier Showcases and Roundtables, an annual What's New event and a client-centric event called Digital Cream.

Some of E-consultancy's client-side corporate subscribers include: *Google, Yahoo, MSN, MySpace, BBC, BT, O2, Lloyds TSB, Shell, John Lewis, Orange, Vodafone, Argos, Yell.com, Norwich Union, Dell, Oxfam, BUPA, Virgin Atlantic, TUI, British Airways, Legal & General, Barclays, Carphone Warehouse, IPC Media, Prudential, Deloitte and Touche, T-Mobile, House of Fraser* and *Estee Lauder*.

Call us to find out more: 0207 6814052. Or email editor@e-consultancy.com.

What is this report and who is it for?

This guide aims to be the first step in a journey towards becoming an in-company expert in usability, which is central to the performance of your website (aka your 'business', if you're selling online).

You can use the guide to discover what usability is all about: how it works, how to manage it, what pitfalls you need to avoid and why an investment in it can be a very smart move.

But you should view this guide as a jumping-off point. Other reports we have published go into much more detail about usability.

We hope this guide helps you and if you have any feedback, please send it to editor@e-consultancy.com.

Best of luck!

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What is usability?

Usability is all about designing an **easy to use** website that appeals to as many people as possible. Websites should be intuitively *usable*. Many aren't.

If people cannot *easily* find what they are looking for on your site, they will simply leave and visit one of your competitors. Most websites have good and bad points – some by accident, and others by design. You need to understand where the problem areas are on your site, and fix them.

Usability allows you to **take control of the user experience** on your website. The upside can be massive. Remember that a website will not optimise itself.

So what are the key elements of usability?

According to usability guru Jakob Nielsen, there are five *key* elements to website usability:

- **Learnability.** How intuitive is the design of the site?

- **Efficiency**. How quickly can users perform tasks, find products etc?

- **Memorability.** Can users easily remember how to use the website?

- **Errors.** What kind of errors are users making, why are they making them and can they easily recover from these mistakes?

- **Satisfaction.** Do your customers enjoy using your website?

Start by focusing on these five points and you'll fix the basics.

A word to the wise
The user experience does **NOT** belong to your CEO, your head of marketing, or the designer with the cool haircut who wants to sex-up the navigation.

The views of your users are the only things that count when it comes to website usability. The user experience is all theirs. If they don't like it, they will leave. The *prospective* customer is always right.

So, be wary of listening to people who are too close to your website. Instead, **watch and measure user behaviour to make logical, objective conclusions about your site**. Let your users tell you where the problem areas lie, not your design agency or the stakeholders in your business.

How does usability work?

What annoys you about websites? Rubbish navigation? Poor checkout or form design? Slow page loading? All of the above, and more besides? Exactly.

Usability is pretty much the science of identifying and fixing these problem areas, using objective data, focus groups and best practice web design techniques.

Common problem areas (and common problems)

1. **Navigation**
   A simple navigation system is essential. A customer should be able to *intuitively* understand how they can find what they want from your site. People don't want to have to work too hard to find what they want, so navigation must make sense and be consistent throughout the site.

2. **Search/filtering options**
   Searches should return only relevant information / products. In addition, effective filtering options help customers to narrow their options and remove irrelevant products.

3. **Loading speed**
   The rule used to be that, if a page doesn't load within eight seconds, users would give up. Now, thanks to broadband, the real rule is one second. According to Jakob Nielsen, page loading *"should be faster than one second as it's about free flowing navigation."*

   Are you a retailer?

   Then you **must** read our Online Retail User Experience Benchmarks reports.

   There are three reports to download: Online Retail 2007 – Checkout Special, Online Retail User Experience Benchmarks 2006 and also the 2004 report.

4. **Checkouts**
   The average abandonment rate at the checkout stage of purchases is 48% and, though there are various other reasons for this, design faults and poor usability are responsible for many dropouts. It is madness to lose a sale for want of a simple, fault-free checkout.

5. **Product pages**
   These should provide all the information that a customer needs to make a purchase decision. In addition, quality product photos, or even videos, are important.

6. **Copywriting**
   The information the site provides must engage the visitor. It needs to be relevant and easy to digest. Keep it brief and to the point. Remember that online, people tend to scan headlines and text, so avoid large chunks of format-free text.
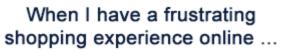
7. **Colours**
   The choice of colours is important – background colours can obscure text so it is normally best to choose a light background. Also, the choice of colours should be consistent throughout the site.

8. **Accessibility**
   It is important to consider the needs of users with disabilities when you design your website. Firstly, you will need to comply with the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Secondly, there are 8.6 million registered disabled people in the UK alone. It would be foolish to exclude such a large potential market from your website.

The proof is in the pudding

- According to figures from Marketing Sherpa, the average abandonment rate for shopping carts is 60%, of which 12% give up before hitting the checkout. This means 48% of potential customers bail out at the checkout stage.[1]

- Reasons for cart abandonment according to a NetIQ study are:
    - Additional costs or delivery times too long - 35%
    - Too much personal information required - 30%
    - Lack of product information - 17%
    - Changed mind or wanted to purchase offline - 14%. [2]

- Site navigation, the checkout process and product pages are the three most important factors for making a decision to buy over the internet.

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[1] [Source: Marketing Sherpa, Ecommerce Benchmark Guide 2006]
[2] [Source: NetIQ, June 2007]

Why does usability matter?

Usability studies will help you identify underperforming areas on your website to improve the user experience, as well as your business.

Put simply, a good customer experience is vital for success in e-commerce. If your site sucks, it doesn't matter how desirable or reasonably priced your products or service might be.

Remember: if a customer cannot easily find what they are looking for, they will shop elsewhere.

Let's look at some wider market trends to understand why you need to focus on the user experience to optimise your business...

Market trends / stats.

- The UK market for usability and accessibility grew by 20% in 2007 to a value of around £180 million, compared to £148m in 2006, according to E-consultancy's Usability and Accessibility Buyer's Guide.

- The main reason for this is increased knowledge of the benefits of user-centred design among UK companies. More business people have recognised that usability offers them the chance to differentiate themselves from competitors, and are aware of the negative effect that a badly designed website can have on their bottom line.

- Other reasons for this increased focus on usability include greater competition online for attention from web users, as well as rising prices for search advertising.

Jakob sez

The cost of usability doesn't necessarily increase with project size, since many usability activities cost about the same, regardless of how big the project is.

A project that's ten times bigger, for example, typically requires only four times more usability spending, according to usability rockstar Jakob Nielsen.

Why should I bother with usability?

Usability can boost your *overall* business performance. Let's take a look at the specifics, to find out how businesses can benefit from investing in a usable website...

- **Increased sales**
  Usability studies will help you identify and fix problem zones, to drive the right kind of user behaviour. And that, for e-commerce companies, means sales. Poor usability means more sales for your competitors.

- **Improved conversion rates**
  Improving usability means that customer will be able to buy from your website more easily, which means even more sales.

- **Improved perception of your brand**
  A more usable website will have more customers recommending your site. In our recent usability survey, respondents considered this the most important benefit of having a usable website. Marketers simply love free advertising.

- **Decreased customer dissatisfaction and churn**
  Customers are less likely to defect to your rivals if the experience is good, which is crucial as it is much cheaper to retain customers than to acquire new ones. Repeat business = higher profits.

- **Greater reach**
  Increase revenue by reaching new users who might otherwise have been excluded from your website, due to the way it was designed.

- **Improved search rankings**
  Many of the principles of good usability will not only make the site more accessible to humans, but also to search engines.

- **Decreased development costs**
  Assuming you factor usability into the design process, you will be saved the cost of fixing errors further on down the line.

- **Reduced customer support costs**
  If your website works properly, and customers can use it easily, there is less reliance on costly customer support / contact centres.

Persuading The Boss

If you need to convince the boss before winning a usability budget then check out our **Usability & User Experience Business Case,** which will provide you with lots of advice and the facts you need to support your cause.

What is the opportunity cost of ignoring usability?

If you make a mess of your user experience, then shoppers will become frustrated and check out the competition. It is highly likely that your competitors will be investing in usability, which means your website will become relatively worse, simply by standing still. Those shoppers won't have any reason to return to your website, if this is the case.

Usability is something you cannot afford to ignore. Customers who experience usability problems on your website can be unforgiving, and site problems can have a negative effect on customer relations.

- A recent survey of US consumers by Harris Interactive found that almost nine out ten respondents have experienced problems when making a transaction online, and 42% of those have defected to a rival or abandoned the process.

- The same study was carried out in the UK, with similar findings:

  o 37% of visitors who have experienced problems conducting online transactions would abandon the transaction after experiencing problems.

  o 20% of those conducting online transactions felt that the ease of completing a transaction was the most important factor in a positive customer experience.

  o 92% of British consumers reported that the ability to complete a transaction without encountering a problem was important or very important to them.

Barriers to adoption

Here are some quotes from last year's Usability & User Experience survey that indicate where usability evangelists are facing resistance within their organisation. Help them see the light!

Lack of internal resource
"*There is a lack of internal resources to carry this out and the company is a traditional offline publisher and it's very difficult to get management buy-in or to get staff to understand and adopt online user experience.*"

Company culture / politics
"*The transition from a sales culture to a customer focused one is a major challenge.*"

"*From experience, the biggest problem is the lack of a common and shared user experience vision. Different stakeholders (say departments within the customer's organisation) fight to push their own agenda with no higher authority to settle differences and build a coherent experience.*"

Lack of internal buy-in
"*Senior management does not see online as a priority for the organisation, and therefore, there is a lack of budget/lack of resources.*"

"*User experience online comes second to user experience in store.*"

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What kind of results can I expect from usability testing?

By making changes in line with usability recommendations you are going to improve the overall experience for visitors.

A better, happier, less painful web experience is likely to stop people leaving your site, by making it easier for them to find the things they are looking for (*eg intuitive navigation, site search, scannable text*).

And what do you get for your money? A better website, ultimately, but what else?

Let's take a look at **the top 6 benefits of usability**, based on a survey we compiled recently:

- Improved perceptions of brand
- Increased conversion rates
- Greater customer loyalty and retention
- Increased customer advocacy
- Increased traffic
- Improved search rankings

That's the view of client-side professionals who have spent money on usability.

Note that all of these things should normally result in a more revenue, and a happier boss.

Is It Worth It?

Good usability agencies will pay for themselves many times over. It has been said that **for every £1 you invest in usability you'll usually get £6 back**, provided you implement the suggested improvements to your website.

More recent research from Jakob Nielsen found that a return on investment of 300% was typical.

So hell yes, it's worth it.

How do I measure usability?

You can easily start measuring how user friendly your website is, by looking at your web analytics data (see box). This is the starting point, before you recruit an agency, set up focus groups, or make any changes to the website.

Web analytics goes hand in hand with implanting best practice usability. Only by using the two together can you get a complete picture of user behaviour and experience on your site. Short of asking them directly, it is the most effective way to understand your customers.

While analytics data will give you *some* valuable information on user behaviour, usability testing will fill in the rest of the picture and tell you why customers behave the way they do.

As a rule of thumb, analytics will tell you WHAT is happening on your website (quantitative) while usability / focus groups will tell you WHY people are behaving in a certain way (qualitative).

> ## What is Web Analytics?
>
> Analytics looks at the behaviour of website visitors. Web analytics data can give an insight into how your customers are collectively navigating through your site – e.g. which product pages are converting customers. It also helps to identify potential problem areas.
>
> **Reading**
> Web Analytics Buyer's Guide
>
> **Training**
> E-consultancy's Web Analytics Training Courses

But beware curve balls. Making sense of data is about more than simply looking at numbers. The data might indicate that more than half of all visitors to your checkout drop out, but it won't tell you why. You'll assume this is a problem with the checkout design. Design a new checkout!

But wait! The problem here may simply be that you haven't displayed the 'shipping costs / delivery options' on your product page, forcing people to enter the checkout to find this information.

When you do make changes to your site make sure you keep a keen eye on the 'before and after' analytics data, to measure performance.

Having implemented usability changes to your site, good analytics tools will help you to see how these alterations have affected customer behaviour. Marry that to the business data (sales, repeat business, customer engagement) and you will be able to prove the value of usability to the boss.

Remember, when making changes: **Test, Track, Tweak. Repeat**.

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Who manages usability?

Responsibility for user experience within organisations is quite varied. It tends to be owned by departments with an interest in marketing and customer experience.

Once a business grows to a certain size it may prove wise to outsource usability to a dedicated agency, unless there are enough resources in-house to manage usability-led website improvements.

In-house

- According to our Usability and User Experience Report 2007 (produced in association with Bunnyfoot) 43% of organisations deal with user experience issues exclusively in-house, while 28% hire third party assistance for their user experience teams.

- For just over a third of organisations, responsibility for the online user experience lies within an in-house website team.

- Another third of companies have an individual or team dedicated to the online user experience while a fifth deem this to be the responsibility of an in-house marketing department.

- Just 5% of in-house respondents say that no-one is responsible for this. Less than 2% of responding organisations say that ownership falls within the remit of the customer experience team.

Outsourcing

Just over half of the organisations we surveyed use an agency or specialist usability company to help them improve the user experience.

- Around a quarter (24%) rely entirely on a usability agency or company to carry out this role, while 15% of respondents work for organisations which use specialist usability companies exclusively to address the user experience. This figure rises to 31% for companies with a turnover of more than £150 million.

Managing An E-commerce Team

Need help figuring out team structure? Need practical solutions to your challenges? Want to know how other companies are coordinating their digital teams?

Then check out our **Managing An E-commerce Team** study, which is based on an E-consultancy survey and interviews with senior executives.

Where do I start with usability?

Assuming you've taken on board our points about the value of web analytics (looking at data to discover problem areas) then you may have some initial ideas about what you'd like to fix.

If you have an in-house web team and analytics data then you can quickly identify where to make changes to a website, and start work. Failing that, you will need to either recruit some talent, or outsource the work to an agency.

I'll do this in-house

If you decide to keep your usability in-house then make sure your staff are trained, and that you use impartial focus groups to test your site.

There are a range of training courses and workshops available to ensure that your team has a full grasp of the key usability issues and can apply these effectively to their company's website (See our training courses).

If you can't afford an expert, don't be afraid of asking a sample of your customers to try out new ideas and approaches on your site before releasing them to the world.

I need to outsource

If it seems to be too much - and designing a website that is easy to use is an increasingly complex task - then it may be wise to turn to the experts. Here are the benefits of seeking expert help:

- **Avoid bias.** Evaluating the user experience requires an objective look at the website and may benefit from an independent third party to help steer the project, not least to keep biased stakeholders at bay.

- **Stand back, then focus in on the detail.** An agency will help you see the bigger picture by digging into the detail, by using focus groups as well as statistics, and by understanding – and focusing on - your business goals.

- **Standards, standards, standards!** Agencies are also more likely to understand usability standards better than your generalist in-house web team. By standards, we're referring to common behaviours exhibited by users across all websites, for example: people usually look

> ### Need an agency?
>
> If you're already sure that you need a usability specialist to help coordinate the research and identify improvements then check out our **Usability & Accessibility Buyer's Guide**, which includes in-depth profiles of 23 dedicated usability agencies, as well as:
>
> - Market value and trends
> - SWOT analysis
> - ROI benefits
> - Tips and pitfalls for buyers
> - Supplier services matrix
>
> **>> See more buyer's guides.**

for an About page to find information on a site, or a Contact page to get in touch.

- **Return on Investment.** Good agencies can deliver huge returns on investment in next to no time, if your website has sufficient scale (revenues) and plenty of scope for improvement.

Ok, so now you'll have an idea about who will help manage your usability strategy. The time is approaching for you to start benchmarking your existing website. So where should you begin?

Five common problem areas
If you're new to usability and aren't sure what to measure, then start by looking at the following five areas where the user experience matters most:

- **Navigation**
  Can users easily find what they are looking for on your site? If not, then many may be leaving in frustration.

- **Checkout abandonment**
  If your site has high rates of checkout abandonment, then it's likely that there is a problem with usability, such as a lengthy registration process.

- **Unclear link text**
  Link text should clearly describe where the link will take the user when they click on it. Vague / ambiguous link text will confuse the user.

- **Registration/logins**
  This is a common source of frustration for customers, as many web forms are badly designed and often overly long.

- **Slow pageload times**
  With the advent of fast broadband connections, customers want to see pages load almost instantly. If they have clicked a link to see some product details and it doesn't load quickly enough, they may well go elsewhere.

Sites that have improved usability

The Cotswold Company [redesigned its e-commerce site](#) in September 2007, and improvements included:

- More intuitive navigation structure.
- A better range, and higher quality, of product photos.
- A smoother checkout process, removing the need for customers to register before the checkout.

A few months on from the revamp, the results are reportedly very promising, with an increase in conversion rates of between 20% and 30%. User feedback has been positive so far too, with many commenting that the site is now much easier to use.

Game Group also [revamped its website](#) in October 2007. Improvements to the site were:

- Better navigation and product pages.
- The addition of user reviews.
- A streamlined, almost enclosed, checkout process.

This too, has been a success so far, with traffic exceeding levels for the same period in 2006 and conversion rates more than doubling. In addition, basket abandonment has fallen significantly.

Usability issues with major sites

Some well known retailers often have usability errors on their sites, which can have a negative impact on the user experience.

For instance, Waterstones [hides its checkout option](#) in a drop-down menu. This means that once customers have added a book to their shopping basket, they are forced to hunt around before they can complete their purchase.

This is something that is likely to be costing sales yet is relatively simple to fix.

The key here is to make it easy for potential customers to buy from you. There should be no head scratching. If customers are ready to buy you have *seconds* to get it right, otherwise they may leave.

River Island, designed in Flash, has a number of [usability problems](#), such as the lack of a search option for users who want to find items quickly.

More seriously, it is completely inaccessible to many of the UK's 8.6m registered disabled people, thus alienating a large potential audience.

Further reading

Usability research from E-consultancy

Online Retail: Checkout Special. A superb guide for any transactional e-commerce company that wants to improve the checkout process. We explain why people dropout before buying products, and it isn't necessarily because your checkout design sucks. Really!

Web Design Best Practice Guide. A comprehensive report that can be used to steer (re)design projects. At 350 pages it is a great reference resource and covers areas such as user-centred design and usability, internet marketing optimisation, information architecture, SEO, web standards, persuasion, analytics, as well as the boring legal stuff you should be aware of.

Online Retail User Experience Benchmarks. Another one of our Retail reports that really hits the mark. Find out why people buy from sites like Amazon, Argos, Tesco and John Lewis, and how these companies go about promoting and selling their stock.

Usability and Accessibility Buyer's Guide. A guide for anybody on the cusp of appointing a usability agency. Includes profiles of what we consider to be the top agencies in this sector, as well as market research, trends and issues, and advice on how to buy (questions to ask) and average rates. Makes your job of researching this space much easier.

Usability and User Experience Report. Based on a survey of 700 internet professionals, this report will help you benchmark your own approach to usability versus the rest of the industry. Findings are broken down by company size and also by sector. Includes detail on usability budgets, ROI, typical services, barriers to adoption and project management.

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E-consultancy's blog articles about usability

Usability and user experience is a subject we write about most days. The E-consultancy blog has a section devoted to usability that features site reviews, tips and advice, interviews with experts, and related research.

Here are a few articles to whet your appetite…

Interview with Jakob Nielsen
Interview with persuasion expert Bryan Eisenberg
House of Fraser - a user experience review
Tips on improving customer experience
Why do customers abandon the checkout process?
Revealed: world's top 10 user experience gurus
Why retailers need effective feature filtering
Top 10 most common e-commerce mistakes
The beauty of site optimisation
Study finds fall in etailers' usability standards
Ten ways to improve online checkouts
Jesse James Garrett on Ajax, Amazon and Web 2.0
Website optimisation - less can be more

Training courses

E-consultancy has a fantastic training division that is retained by some of the world's biggest brands. We train both privately and publicly, depending on your needs, and because we truly understand how the internet affects businesses we're able to deliver everything from 'starter courses' to high-level strategic briefings for executives.

Check out our Usability and User Experience Training Courses.

Forthcoming roundtables

We regularly host roundtables in a behind-closed-doors setting so attendees are comfortable talking about the challenges and issues that they face. Most roundtables take place in London over the course of a couple of hours. They're very exclusive and normally don't have any more than 15 attendees. Check out our schedule of forthcoming roundtables if you're keen to find out more.