Web site evaluation

Conducted for

(The Client)

By Information & Design

October 17th, 1998

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Contents

Introduction

Information & Design conducted a usability evaluation of (The Client's) web site on October 17th, 1998.

The web site is located at:

(client site URL)

The site is intended for use by the general public, as an adjunct to (The Client's) shopfront activities.

According to the Marketing Director, Mr (Client Name), the purpose of the site is to:

- Enhance customer perception of (The Client)
- Ensure an online presence in the face of similar moves by competitors
- Provide the potential to expand into overseas market
- Provide customers with the ability to order books online
- Provide an opportunity to inform people about books in which they may be interested, thus enhancing customer service and increasing sales.

This report presents the findings and recommendations arising from the evaluation.

The reviewer spent 2 hours using the site, and evaluated it against a set of accepted measures ('heuristics').

Mr (Client Name) indicated that the site was developed on the assumption that the overwhelming majority of customers have monitors set to a resolution of 800x600 pixels, and the evaluation was carried out at that resolution.

Summary

In the main, the web site is well presented and has a professional appearance.

No broken links were found, and this indicates that an effective maintenance strategy is in place.

The site appears to contain most of the information a customer would require.

However, there are several usability issues which should be addressed if the site is to achieve its goals.

There are five primary issues:

1. Navigation is difficult. Customers are not presented with a clear indication of the current location, and it is easy to become lost.
2. Several graphic files are very large (some pages contain approximately 75Kb), which means that pages will take a long time to download unless customers have very fast internet access. Experience and testing has shown that customers have very little patience with long download times.
3. The Search facility is inadequate. In addition, the 'Quick Search' facility is not tied visually to the 'Expert Search' facility. Customers who use the 'Quick Search' may never become aware that a more detailed search facility is available. For such a site, the ability to search is crucial.
4. Several buttons (such as 'Search' in the 'Expert Search' screen) are 'below the fold'. That is, it is necessary to scroll to reach them. The layout is such that it is not always apparent to the customer that it is necessary to scroll in order to reach these buttons.
5. It is difficult for newcomers to make a purchase, since there is no clear indication that they must become members to do so. The process of becoming a member is also difficult, and in our opinion represents an unnecessary hurdle. Error messages in this area are poor.

Each issue is discussed in the body of this report, and recommendations are made for addressing them.

Recommendations

This report recommends addressing each of the issues identified.

Many of the issues can be resolved or at least improved without major re-design.

However, it is recommended that:

- An extensive re-design of the Search facility be undertaken
- The requirement for customers to become members before purchasing is reconsidered. In our opinion, this requirement presents an unnecessary hurdle.

In addition, it is strongly suggested that usability testing be undertaken, since no other form of evaluation is as effective at uncovering problems encountered by actual customers. Such usability testing need not be an expensive, time-consuming or difficult undertaking, and will be likely to provide additional data which will aid in improving the site.

Information & Design would be pleased to assist in this regard.

Detailed findings

The following pages contain detailed findings. A copy of a checklist used as part of the evaluation process is contained at the end of the report on page 9.

A severity rating has been assigned to each issue, depending on the probable impact on customers.

Navigation

Navigation refers to the ability to find one's way within the web site. Navigation is particularly important on the internet, since people easily become lost. It is also crucial to support navigation because of the ease with which customers can switch to a competitor site.

Issue	Recommendation	Severity
the 'Quick Search' facility is not tied visually to the 'Expert Search' facility. Customers who use the 'Quick Search' may never become aware that a more detailed search facility is available.	Place the two search facilities together. Consider not having two different search types. A single search could provide both functions. Consider providing one or more examples of how to use the search.	**Critical**
The current location is not always clear.	Use the Navigation bar (which is always available) to provide this feedback. This can be done by shading or otherwise changing the visual appearance of the current location element on the Navigation bar, or by providing a specific 'You are Here' indicator at all times. Provide a meaningful title on each page.	High
It is not clear how to return to the home page. The small company logo is on the top right side of the screen provides this function, but it is in a 'dead' spot visually.	Use the main company logo, at the top left of the screen, to provide a link to the Home page. This is much more visible and is also more consistent with general practice on the web. Consider adding the word 'Home' immediately below the logo also.	High
Account information is not available from the Home page.	Provide a link from the home page.	Medium

Functionality

Functionality refers to the support of all the activities which may be carried out on the site.

Issue	Recommendation	Severity
It is necessary to scroll to reach the 'Search', 'Next' & 'Prev' buttons on many screens.	Improve the layout to avoid the necessity of scrolling. Where scrolling is unavoidable, provide a clear visual cue to indicate that there is more information below.	**Critical**

Control

Customers should feel that they are always in control of the interaction.

Issue	Recommendation	Severity
If a non-member attempts to purchase a product without signing up for membership, the attempt is rejected without adequate explanation of what has occurred.	Provide an explanation of what has occurred. If possible, allow non-members to purchase, since this requirement appears to represent an unnecessary hurdle.	**Critical**
The Home page is 75kB, and several others are larger than 60kB.	Reduce the file sizes. It appears that graphics have not been optimized—this can be readily done in most professional (and many shareware) graphic packages.	**Critical**
The process of becoming a member is extremely awkward.	Resolving this issue requires design effort. Information & Design would be pleased to assist in this regard.	**Critical**
Graphic links are not always available as text links. Many customers 'click ahead' without waiting for graphics to load—lack of provision of text links prevents this.	Provide text links (usually at the bottom of the page) to match all graphic links.	Low

Language

It is important to speak the language of your customer, in order to prevent confusion and frustration.

(No issues identified in this area.)

Feedback

Feedback refers to the provision of information about what is happening at any time.

Issue	Recommendation	Severity
Mandatory fields are not indicated on the order form.	Indicate clearly which fields are mandatory. It is common practice on the web to use an asterisk (*) to indicate mandatory fields.	Medium
There is no facility for customers to receive email feedback		Medium

Consistency

It is important to use language and visual cues in a manner that is both internally consistent and consistent with general practice, so that customers do not have to learn any new techniques in order to use the site successfully.

Issue	Recommendation	Severity
Links do not always match the titles of the pages to which they refer. Many catalogue names in links are different to the names of the actual catalogue sections. For example, 'Children's Books' leads to a page called 'Kids'	Match all links to the linked page titles.	Low
Visited links do not change colour. Many customers rely on this to support their navigation through the site.	Use 'standard' link colours.	Low

Error prevention and correction

Errors should be prevented from occurring in the first instance wherever possible. When errors do occur, it is important to provide clear explanations of what has happened, and clear instructions for how to recover.

Issue	Recommendation	Severity
Many unnecessary errors occur. For example: • If customers order 'out-of-stock' items, an error occurs when they attempt to conclude the payment. • If a search returns zero hits, an error message is returned. • The credit card number field does not allow spaces.	Examine all error messages with a view to reducing the possibility of their occurring. Resolving this issue may require further design effort.	High
No help is available for error messages.	If an error cannot be resolved during the interaction, at least provide contact details so the customer can report the issue for resolution.	High
Error messages do not describe what action is necessary. For example: • 'Search returned zero items'	Examine all error messages with a view to improving the wording and advice given.	High
Error messages do not always provide a clear exit point. For example, the 'Search returned zero items' has no exit—the customer must use 'Back' on the browser to back out.	Provide clear exit points (at least to the Home and Feedback pages) on all error messages.	Medium

Checklist

This checklist was used as an aid to the evaluation process. Blank copies of the checklist are available free of charge from our web site at:

http://www.infodesign.com.au/forms

You may wish to use such checklists for future in-house evaluations.

Navigation

	Compliance			
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
There is a clear indication of the current location			✓	Navigation bar is always available, but does not indicate current location.
There is a clearly-identified link to the Home page			✓	Link is on RHS; main logo is not a link
All major parts of the site are accessible from the Home page		✓		Account info not available
If necessary, a site map is available	✓			Not applicable
Site structure is simple, with no unnecessary levels		✓		Account information is hard to find
If necessary, an easy-to-use Search function is available		✓		'Quick Search' available, but no clear link to 'Expert Search'; When zero search results are returned, there is no facility to re-search.

Functionality

	Compliance			
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
All functionality is clearly labelled		✓		'Search' button, 'Next' & 'Prev' buttons require scrolling to reach
All necessary functionality is available without leaving the site	✓			
No unnecessary plug-ins are used	✓			

Control

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
		Compliance		
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
The user can cancel all operations	✓			
There is a clear exit point on every page		✓		Shopping trolley has no exit point for non-members.
Page size is less than 50kB/page		✓		Main page is 75kB, several others greater than 60kB
All graphic links are also available as text links		✓		Navigation bar links not available
The site supports the user's workflow		✓		Generally yes, non when becoming a member
All appropriate browsers are supported	✓			

Language

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
		Compliance		
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
The language used is simple	✓			
Jargon is avoided	✓			

Feedback

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
		Compliance		
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
If necessary, online help is available	✓			
It is always clear what is happening on the site		✓		Lack of navigation causes confusion at times; mandatory fields not indicated on order form
Users can receive email feedback if necessary			✓	No facility
All feedback is prompt	✓			
Users are informed if a plug-in or browser version is required	✓			
Users can give feedback via email or a feedback form	✓			

Consistency

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
Only one word or term is used to describe any item	✓			
Links match titles of the pages to which they refer		✓		Many catalogue names in links are different to the names of the actual catalogue sections. For example, 'Children's Books' leads to a page called 'Kids'
Standard colours are used for links and visited links		✓		Visited links do not change colour
Terminology is consistent with general web usage	✓			

Error prevention and correction

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
Errors do not occur unnecessarily		✓		'Out-of-stock' orders lead to an error; typing text in ISBN field returns zero hits instead of validating; credit card field dos not allow spaces
Error messages are in plain language	✓			
Error messages describe what action is necessary		✓		Gen. no help available; e.g. 'Search returned zero items'
Error messages provide a clear exit point		✓		e.g. 'Search returned zero items' has no exit - customer must use 'Back' on browser
Error messages provide contact details for assistance			✓	

Visual clarity

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Notes
The layout is clear		✓		Several screens are cluttered; ALL CAPITALS are used on some pages
There is sufficient 'white space'	✓			
All images have ALT text assigned		✓		Patchy. At a guess only about 50% have ALT text
Unnecessary animation is avoided		✓		Animated email icon is distracting and may annoy