



The never-ending process

Design can make the difference between a website becoming the next Amazon or the latest dot-com flop. It needs to be right from the very start, with continuing adjustments afterwards. By Martin Croft

Website design is about far more than simple aesthetics and, indeed, what looks good is not always what works best, and vice versa. As Ryan Webb, project director at digital and direct response media agency EquiMedia, says: "Site design and layout should be used to reduce the risk of users dropping out as a result of ineffective architecture and content, and guide the user through the website to achieve the desired objective."

Marketers who want to have the best and most effective website possible will need to understand that designing a website that works is, first and foremost, about creating the best possible experience across the whole of the user journey.

But this does not always happen, as Nima Yassini, head of digital at WPP-owned integrated agency RMG Connect, says: "Web design in the UK is a bit of a shambles. The focus is all placed on the brand's needs instead of the consumers'. Simply following the trend, creating minimal looking sites and including cult activities like social networking, because everyone else is, does not automatically make for a good website. Web design must offer consumers what they want, when they say they want it.

"Obviously, once a site is running, marketers can monitor what users are actually doing and gain valuable insights into what parts of the site are working and what parts are not," he continues. "But that sort of 'live testing' cannot be used in the early stages of site design. Instead, marketers and their IT people turn to other ways of measuring successful design."

According to Trenton Moss, a director at usability and accessibility consultancy



WebCredible, the whole process should start with the most basic step of all – testing using paper. Moss says: "Just sketch pages on paper and run them past some users. It's incredibly crude, but you'll get great feedback."

QUICK CHANGES

A lot of marketers might think that you need to have an almost finished site before you let users loose on it, but Moss rejects this: "The earlier you test, the less you will get in terms of feedback, but the quicker you will be able to make changes. With paper, you can change something in an hour; leave it until you have a beta site, and it'll take months to make changes."

Incidentally, the experts stress that it is important to remember that websites have to be designed "outside-in" rather than "inside-out." The former involves asking real users what they want to see: the latter involves the company assuming that it knows what it wants to see. Inside-out websites tend to be difficult for external users to navigate because they use company- or industry-specific jargon, or the architecture reflects the way the company is structured, rather than the way outsiders expect it to be.

The next stage in the design

process would be to "wire-frame" the design – create very simple depictions of the various pages in the site, without any graphics, but showing where content would appear, with indications of buttons and links. Moss adds: "You would use these in interviews with users, one-on-one or in focus groups, for initial usability testing."

Once users have had a chance to look at the wire frames, and their feedback has been assessed, the team can move on the graphics. It is at this point that more sophisticated testing techniques such as eye tracking would be introduced.

Eye tracking involves users wearing lightweight headsets which track where their eyes look on the screen, and for how long. The recorded information is usually expressed as a "heat map" – a picture of the screen with areas that received a lot of attention highlighted in shades of blue.

But, as Chris Rourke, managing director of usability consultancy User Vision comments: "Eye tracking is a fantastic tool, but the results need to be supplemented with other techniques and should not be taken out of context. A long gaze can either mean that the user is attracted to a section by engaging text or image, or that it is confusing

and difficult to use. A short gaze can mean that something was instantly understood or that it was glossed over."

A similar process is called "cursor tracking", which records where a user's cursor is moved on screen and where the mouse button is clicked. This tends to be easier, quicker and cheaper to do with larger numbers of people than eye tracking.

LIVE TESTING

Once a site goes into beta test, or even live, usability testing remains just as important. Ryan Webb at EquiMedia says: "It is a great advantage to be able to follow a programme of 'test and learn', using a flexible content management system to control various elements of a site. Live testing is critical for identifying the effectiveness of each pod within a page and further shaping the overall architecture of a site."

Peter Ballard of Foolproof observes: "The real power is in user-experience testing. By making your site a better experience for consumers, you are going to improve your conversion rates. By improving your conversion rates, your marketing budget will go further. By lowering the cost-per-sale, you will be able to afford higher-priced pay-per-click (PPC) listings. Higher-priced PPCs give higher placements, which increase traffic to your site. User experience will give you the insight to make your site a rewarding experience for shoppers and search engines – improving conversion rates twice."

In other words, marketers have to realise that the website design process can never be considered finished. As Moss says: "the key thing is to design and test, design and test, design and test..." ●

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