



Special report

Online usability

Proceed to checkout or log out?

With an increasing amount of money being spent online, owners of e-commerce websites must ensure customers buy from their site and make the process as easy as possible. By Martin Croft

Consumers are spending more and more of their money online, and retailers have begun to wake up to the enormous opportunities that the internet offers as a channel to market.

But a big problem with e-commerce is the way the online retail sites work: off-line, standing in a store, the average consumer would be likely to ask for help rather than abandon the shopping trolley and walk out. Online, however, it is a different matter.

As Paul Mead, a director of VCCP Search, the search marketing subsidiary of ad agency VCCP, says: "If the usability is poor the customer often migrates, almost instantaneously, to the phone, and purchasing via call centres costs the vendor far more, so it is essential to reduce this attrition rate."

Yet many companies trying to sell their products through a website are still relying on the consumer or business user to alert them to problems, either by e-mail or a phone call. But recent research conducted by opinion poll company Harris International on behalf of online customer experience management company TeaLeaf into online shoppers' behaviour suggests that a significant number of customers will click away from a site where they have hit a problem, and take their custom elsewhere.

According to TeaLeaf vice-president of marketing and product strategy, Geoff Galat, "the survey showed that 88% of people had encountered some sort of problem and abandoned a sale. And 44% of the people who had a problem said they would buy from a rival site instead."

A third of online shoppers said they had got error messages when they tried to do something, 37%



said they just had difficulty navigating, and 30% had difficulty logging in. Galat points out that if a shopper is an infrequent visitor to a particular site, they will often forget their user name or password, so websites need to make sure they flag up opportunities to get that information e-mailed to the user right at the start of the process.

Some sites, he says, only ask for user name or password when the consumer has spent considerable time going through the purchasing process – and if the user has forgotten their details, they are likely to feel that they have wasted that time. Similarly, many users are angered when charges such as postage and packing are only mentioned right at the end of the checkout process. Galat observes: "Consumers are not tolerant – they expect things to work."

MONITORING BEHAVIOURS

Barry Holloway is marketing director of online price comparison site uSwitch, which uses TeaLeaf and other packages to monitor its customers' online behaviour. Holloway says: "We use various different ways to look at the 'issue.

We use TeaLeaf and also site analytics to identify where people drop out. TeaLeaf allows us to look at things on a much more granular level, which is very useful for identifying bugs. We can see the individual user journey, so we can see the sort of PC the user was on, their browser, what they were doing..."

But, as Holloway points out, e-commerce sites also have to understand much more fundamental things about consumers – including whether they were actually ready to make the buying decision during that visit to the site.

USwitch begins with a user-centric design process, with lots of trials. "Testing is great," he says, "but it's an artificial simulation of the user experience. The real user experience will highlight even more problems."

WORDS OF WARNING

Trenton Moss is a director of usability and analytics consultancy Webcredible, which has also recently conducted research into online shopping. According to Moss, the Webcredible study, The Online High Street, "showed that leading high street retailers are failing to meet basic standards of online usability." The study evaluated online stores against 20 key usability criteria, awarding each a rating out of 100. Moss observes: "An alarming 35% of the websites failed to achieve a rating of more than 50."

As he puts it, bluntly: "If people can't find what they are looking for they can't buy it. And if the checkout process is not intuitive, they will drop out. Sophisticated interfaces and snazzy websites are all well and good, but that's not

what makes consumers buy when online. They look for clear browsing and navigation, upfront charges and an easy checkout process. Your website should be designed around how users actually think, not what you think should be on there."

Moss adds: "If online retailers concentrate on making the buying process as user-friendly, simple and transparent as possible, they will see a big difference in the bottom line."

But some experts sound a note of warning. As Tony Coad, one of the founders of lifestyle database marketing in the UK and now a director of real-time sales leads company NDL International says: "Tracking what people do and how they behave on a website may only be an indication of what people are being forced to do as a result of the site's deficiencies – in its menu systems or its layout – rather than being what the users actually want to do. This can lead to substantial misunderstandings about a person's likely behaviour."

Stephen Bentley, chief executive of marketing services provider Granby Marketing Services, points out that the processing power is a vital part of the consumer online experience. He says: "Ultimately, it is a website's processing speed that will ensure the consumer commits until the end of the transaction. Consumers buy online because they are time-poor and want to complete a transaction quickly."

As Webcredible's Trenton Moss says: "There is a lot of money ready to be spent on the internet. Internet sales were up by 40% last year and online spending is set to reach £60bn by 2010. With consumers just one click away from leaving your site to go to another, it's surprising that there are still many online retailers that are failing to reach a basic standard of usability." ●