



Simplicity sells

As competition grows in the ever-expanding online shopping market, brands must ensure their site is quick and easy to navigate for users.

By David Benady

Websites for packaged grocery brands, financial services products and top fashion marques are among the most cluttered, off-putting and hard to use on the internet. This is the verdict of usability consultants who believe many brands are failing to create easy-to-use websites and could be losing sales and brand loyalty as a result.

The consultants have identified brands, including Norwich Union, Dior and Ralph Lauren, as missing a trick when it comes to website usability. They either trip users up when asking for contact details or employ hi-tec introduction pages, videos and interactivity that take an age to load.

By contrast, sites for brands such as WH Smith, Hamleys, Apple and the BBC are scoring highly in the usability stakes. They make it easy for users to find the information they need and are structured in a logical and easy-to-navigate fashion.

Web 2.0 has opened up the internet to a new array of tools which enhance social interaction, but have added an extra layer of complexity that may detract from the flow of communication. The urge to turn sites into over-crowded emporia of video, games and other interactive add-ons has made the user experience on many sites busy, confusing and unclear.



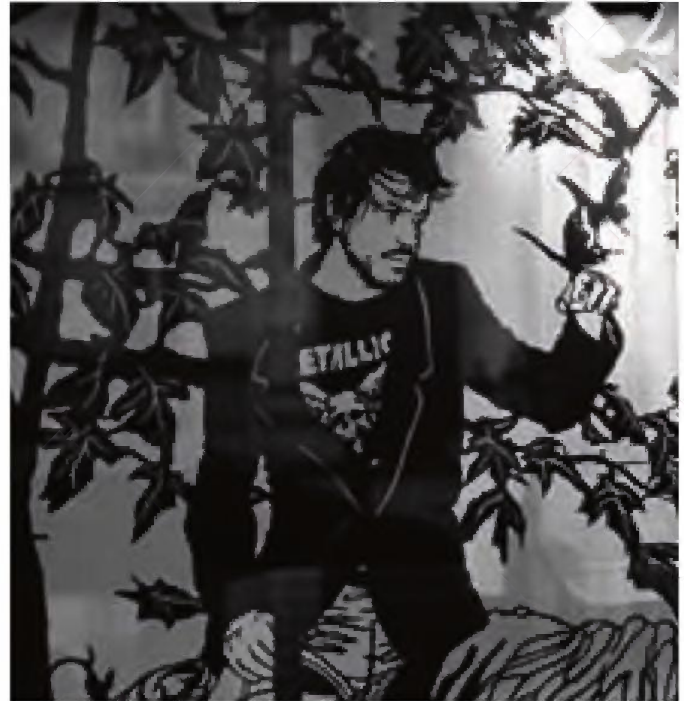
Pretty but difficult: Ralph Lauren's site is an example of how bad usability can trip users up

The best sites put the needs of the end user at the heart of their designs. Easy-to-use websites offer brands huge benefits, such as keeping enquiries to call centres to a minimum, building loyalty among customers and ensuring shopping carts are not abandoned before the check-out.

But given that the internet era is more than ten years old, it is surprising how many sites fail to see the world from the customer's point of view. "Too many brands are still forcing their messages on the consumer and designing sites that represent the company's view and what they think the user might want," says Mo Rogers, direc- ►



Style over substance? The Dior Homme website is popular, despite usability issues, because it demonstrates the brand's products in an attractive way



tor of strategic services at AKQA. She says that ensuring greater usability means constantly thinking about the needs of end users and applying design techniques with that in mind. But it is easy to over-complicate the process. "Keep it simple. Get to know your consumer really well, understand what they are thinking and feeling about your brand. Provide them with content, tools and types of engagement that meet their needs and allow them to start a dialogue with you," she says.

She rates Apple and BBC for having clear, user-centred websites, which build on the brands' strong design heritage: "The end result is well-structured, intuitive and highly usable."

However, others fail to achieve these high standards. "Fashion labels regularly commit every usability crime in the book: opening multiple browser windows; pure Flash-based, labyrinthine navigation; ultra high-resolution images which take forever to load; and no clear purpose to the experience, but just a set of images and MPEGs," Rogers says. "Many packaged goods brands are also poor, particularly when the site ends up showing the most recent TV ad, perhaps just supported by a small game that serves little purpose except to tick the box of 'interactivity'".

However, the Dior and Ralph Lauren sites do have their fans, as they offer a clear demonstration of the brands' products. According to a survey by usability agency Webcredible, the best high street e-commerce sites are improving their ease of use every year. This year,

the top 20 sites boosted their average usability score as measured by the agency to 67.8 from 57 last year. This highlights the retailers' recognition of the importance of usability in winning sales in an increasingly competitive environment.

The usability league of high street ecommerce sites is topped in the survey by WH Smith, rising from 17th place last year. Early Learning Centre's site jumped to second place from eighth last year and Hamleys leapt up the league to share joint third with John Lewis and last year's number one HMV.

Use them or lose them

Webcredible director Trenton Moss says the sites have addressed the basic barriers to usability. They have eliminated hidden delivery costs, ditched confusing check-out procedures and weeded out repeated error pages. He points to some of the usability problems that websites can face. For example, Norwich Union's site commits a cardinal error. When users apply for car insurance, an error message appears if they leave a gap anywhere in their phone number, but they are not advised to join up the number. "A lot of users are lost at that point," Moss says.

He suggests that sites should use panels of potential users to spot any potential pitfalls. "You recruit ten people who are typical of the target audience and set them tasks on the site. You soon uncover anything that makes it difficult to complete those tasks and then you can make the improvements," he explains. But he says this research needs to be carried out by a usability expert, rather than by an in-house web designer, or potential problems may be missed.

Another method that can help in building usable websites is card sorting. Research respondents are given cards bearing the titles of all the various pages on the website and are asked to sort them into logical groups. This can form the basis of the site map and is indicative of how users naturally structure information.

As the web gets even more complex, brands will need to ensure that they keep the needs of users at the forefront of their site designs. ●

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