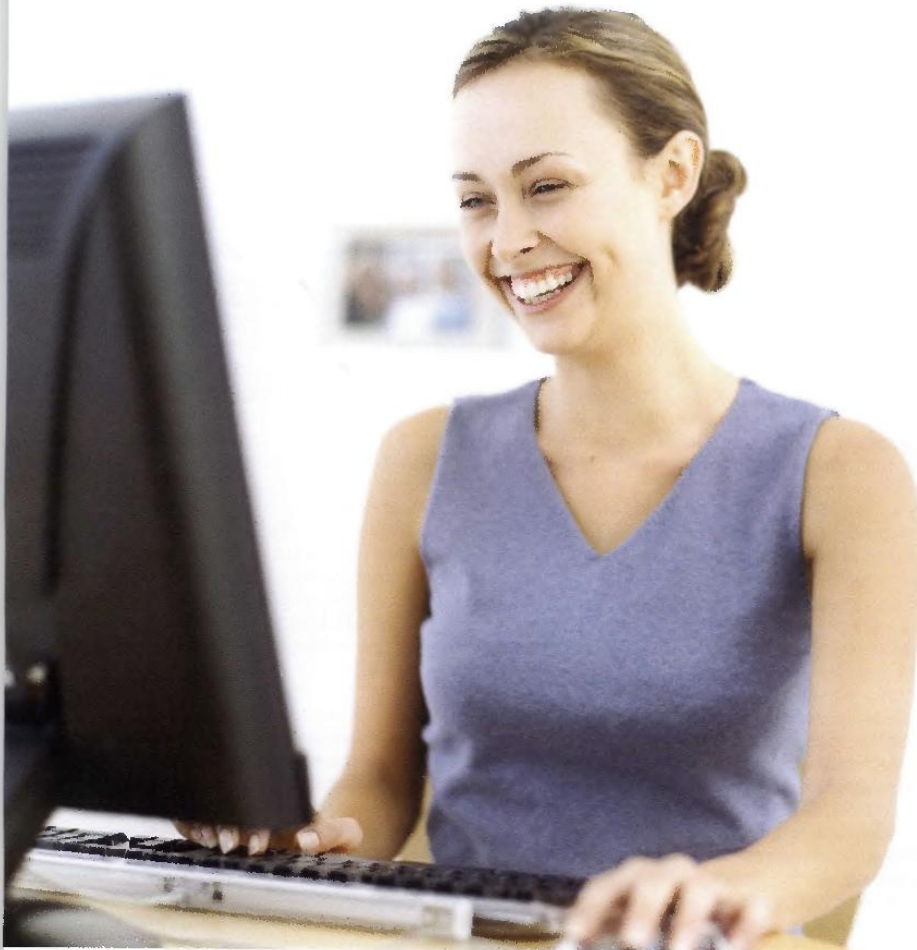




LE ARRIVAZIONI WELLS

coast
DIGITAL



Putting the customer first

With customer expectations increasing all the time why are so many companies still overlooking usability when it comes to their web sites.

David Reed reports

Watching how users handle and interact with a physical product is a common step in new product development. It is easy to spot companies who have been down this route because what they sell is intuitive and a pleasure to use. Those who have not offer clunky, complicated devices that have you running to the handbook (or technical support) within minutes.

Websites are no different. As the front door to your business online, they should be easy to understand and navigate with few barriers to the completion of the tasks they are intended to support.

So why do so many companies neglect usability in their website development?

2

the number of clicks a user is away from making a purchase on MoS's new website

Commonly the first time it is given any thought is when problems arise. "Typically, it happens when a client has hit a sales plateau or has even seen a decline," says Robin Moore, head of consultancy and client services at Coast Digital.

External factors could be playing a part in this, such as increased competitor advertising or price promotions. But it's not necessary for anything to have changed on a website for it to become less satisfying to users, as their expectations are increasing all the time.

For this reason, Moore says that, "you need to do a balanced internal audit and testing to obtain an external view." Web analytics will provide the internal perspective, showing where customers are dropping off in the journey before completion.

However, to gain the external view, you need to run some form of focused usability test. "Common issues lie in the transactional process, so getting this right is key to increasing sales, but even so you still get sites that open up a separate window to a third-party e-commerce site, that is quite common," says Moore. (Coast Digital has written Time for Tune Up: How improving usability can transform the fortunes of your website, available from www.coastdigital.co.uk.)

A range of specialist usability agencies have sprung up to help website owners to get this external insight. User Vision has experience working for major online retailers like Amazon and Dell. Managing director Chris Rourke notes that, "website usability is getting better over time. People are learning the lessons."

Rourke argues that usability testing has to be aligned with a review of online marketing. "If along the way the user is not pushed to go to the next step, they will leave," he says.



Rudy Tambala:

"We did a lot of research and corporate navel-gazing about our music lifestyle brands"



"You can also get problems with the search facility on a site, as it is not likely to be as good as Google. If somebody uses plurals or misspells, the search facility may say you don't have that product. Or your product description may be different from your users, such as video camera rather than camcorder," says Rourke.

Solving this can get quite technical, since it involves changes to the metadata used within the stock holding system to allow for effective word association in search. That is a more complicated job than moving a navigation bar or changing the colour scheme.

A common reason for these problems is the disparity between the business insider's perspective and the customer's view. To the e-commerce or marketing manager, product descriptions, site navigation and other factors may seem obvious.

Equally, it is possible for a website to end up being hard to use because the marketing department has over developed, perhaps adding too many bolt-ons, without stepping back to think about the bigger picture. Under short-term pressure to deliver results, this is a common issue.

Ministry of Sound (MoS) has just relaunched its website because, in the words of Rudy Tambala, head of Internet and innovation at the company: "Everything about it was wrong." A review of its web presence revealed there were 27 separate online entities with no central, coherent MoS site.

"We did a lot of research and corporate navel-gazing about our music lifestyle brands. As a result, we have realigned our strategy because in the past there has been little focus about our brand stretch," says Tambala.

As well as an extensive range of licenced

products being promoted to site visitors, MoS had also become a repository of online editorial about clubbing, much of which had no connection to the host event. But the most striking decision made about the relaunch also has important revenue implications.

"We have cleaned up the site and focused on making it relevant. We have created a stripped-down, minimal clean site with simple navigation," says Tambala. "In the past, we were selling a lot of third-party advertising, but we were not embracing our audience. When people come to Ministry of Sound, they want to see Ministry of Sound stuff."

"The biggest difference is that we have removed third-party advertising," he says. That cuts out a £500,000 revenue stream. But Tambala argues that making these sales had been put ahead of looking after the customer base and delivering the right online experience to them.

At a technical level, the site now hosts its own digital download and fulfilment platforms, rather than sending buyers to a third party site. The main website sits above these and provides the marketing platform. "That means a user is only two clicks away from purchasing – it used to be seven or eight," says Tambala.

If losing revenue is unusual, so is budgeting for usability testing. "Most clients only allocate budget for putting up the website, not for testing and improving it," says Ellie Beasley, strategy planner at Underwired. "We try to encourage them to test as much as possible and think of it as a key part of the customer journey."

Where a site is struggling to keep visitors and convert them into customers, she believes it is usually down to a design fault. Often, that can

be a failure to ensure the site reflects what consumers expect from it.

"The first thing we do is start trying to gather information about the audience and what is likely to engage them," she says. Getting that insight about users and their expectations is neither complicated, nor overly expensive.

At Webcredible, director Trenton Moss says: "Typically, the first thing we do, if a client has done nothing before, is run a usability test with ten typical users. We set them realistic tasks and monitor them. You get amazing feedback from that."

Users are asked to talk out loud about what they are trying to do and how it feels.

"It is not that expensive – between £7,000 and £15,000 – but it can deliver a huge return on investment. Once you have done that, you can get buy-in because people have seen what happens in those tests," he says.

What is evident from digital marketers when talking about website usability is that the objectives of the business and of its customers do not always match up well. Equally, sites can get overwhelmed by other marketing objectives, such as swamping them with third party ads.

As these examples show, sites may have completely opposing needs, from increasing ad revenue to cutting it back, from improving relevance to a niche audience to widening it out to a broader demographic. If there is one key issue in usability it is that you have to let users tell you what they need, rather than you telling them.

As Coast Digital's Moore observes: "Great usability delivers huge rewards, it can transform the fortunes of your website. It is about removing distractions, and playing to your strengths and reducing any weaknesses. ●