



# Helping buyers

**Constructing a great site is pointless if users can't find their way around it. Studies show regular analysis is key to repeat and extended visits. Mike Fletcher investigates**

Following the Government's decision to nationalise Northern Rock in February and take the beleaguered bank into a period of public ownership, E-consultancy took the view that we're all Northern Rock shareholders now and therefore did its bit by conducting a usability assessment of the bank's website.

The tongue-in-cheek report does not paint a favourable picture, but it raises an important point. Usability is key to being able to fulfill online goals and without regular analysis, all the work and marketing spend to drive traffic to a specific site could unravel within seconds of a user landing on the homepage.

More than 83 per cent of internet users are likely to leave a website if they have too many clicks to find what they're looking for, according to accountancy firm Arthur Andersen. Usability studies have shown that internet users don't hang around much longer than 8.6 seconds for a page to download. In fact, almost 60 per cent of visitors who experience usability problems on a website do not return. It is believed that e-commerce sites commonly drive away nearly half of repeat business by making it difficult for visitors to find the information they need.

According to web usability expert Jakob Nielsen, the average e-commerce site could increase its sales by 79 per cent with a usability redesign, while increasing the sales-to-conversion rate by 100 per cent and traffic by 150 per cent.

Usability and accessibility specialist Webcredible published a study into UK retailers in April last year that predicted high-street chains were set to miss out on some of the predicted £7 billion 2007 Christmas online sales bonanza because



**Amazon improved its performance by developing a strong homepage, more accurate search results and stronger customer service**

**Michelle Fuller, eDigital Research**

their websites made it too difficult for shoppers to browse, find and pay for goods. Confusing search results, poor navigation and complicated checkout procedures were among the worst mistakes identified in 'The O' line High Street' study.

The report evaluated the websites of 20 stores in October 2006 against 20 key usability criteria, awarding each a Web Usability Index rating out of 100. Marks & Spencer topped the Index with 81, while Clinton Cards and TopShop propped up the league table with 25 and 31 respectively.

"Our study threw up some real surprises," says Webcredible managing director, Trenton Moss. "At the time, TopShop didn't even provide a search function and the Clinton Cards website gave users the option to add products to their basket without actually pricing them. We were also shocked to find that only seven out of the 20 websites provided clear links to the most

## ITV examines its extra media services with Foviance

ITV selected Foviance and its WebAbacus technology to measure the online use of the commercial broadcaster's streaming media services. Following the £20 million revamp of its digital offer in August last year, ITV stepped up its delivery of simulcasts for ITV1, ITV2 and ITV3. The simulcasts allow audiences to watch programming online, on-demand and free for up to 30 days.

The broadcaster brought in Foviance to analyse the success of its expanded services, and to provide detail on the way streaming

media is being used and viewed. The WebAbacus solution is now generating usage reports.

"We were confident that we could deliver a solution quickly that met ITV's requirements," says WebAbacus project manager, Sean Burton. "WebAbacus is an analytical platform and is not simply a set of canned reports. It empowers end users to create new reports 'on the fly' using the purely web-based interface. The reports can then reference WebAbacus' proprietary data store and produce reports in real-time without the need



*I'm a Celebrity... drove the success of the streaming service*

to reprocess the data."

Initial data shows that since the website relaunch, video consumption has doubled month on month to

a peak of 2.2 million video views in November, driven mainly by the popularity of *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here*. Video views for

January also averaged around the two million mark.

Short clips are emerging as the most popular videos to view, but full episodes now contribute to around 40 per cent of all videos viewed each month.

ITV Broadband head of business information, Shorful Islam, says: "We can generate as much data as we want, when we want. We can see how many times a video has been played and from what area of the site it has been accessed. This gives us good information on the relative popularity of genres within the site."



# round the maze

important pages on the website: the basket and checkout. If visitors can't find them, they can't purchase any items."

The sites' irregularities have been corrected following Webcredible's now-annual usability and accessibility reports, but these cases highlight the need for usability studies to take place at the concept stage of website development as opposed to waiting until the site is launched.

## Making an early start

Chris Averill, managing director of CADinteractive, believes clients are beginning to realise the importance of usability earlier in the process. But while web 2.0 continues to drive on-line innovation, focus on usability testing needs to be retained.

In November 2007, the newly rebranded National Express appointed CADinteractive to deliver a website that would streamline the various travel services the company now operates. The portal had to direct customers quickly and efficiently across the group of travel services and the existing coach website had to be moved to a new domain without confusing coach customers.

Averill explains the usability testing process: "Three wireframes prototypes were developed and tested remotely by nationwide users with coach, train and bus profiles. The final version was tested with two rounds of lab-based research and changes to the site build were made. Continuous testing that included eye tracking, heat maps and mouse movements on the site ensured that coach visitors would not find it difficult to navigate directly to the coach website and the site was successfully launched on 9 December."

Even after a site's launch, the testing needs to continue. Michelle Fuller is director of eDigital Research, which released its own e-retail benchmarking study on 25 February, placing Amazon at the top of its rankings. She says: "Regular feedback ensures that a website can keep up with changes in customer expectations. Amazon improved its performance over Christmas 2007 by developing a strong and clear homepage, more accurate search results and stronger customer service."

The problem with continued testing, however, is that proposals are not signed off because senior management are not ▶





## HotelConnect focuses on its customers with Speed-Trap



**The biggest plus point for HotelConnect was being able to take our high level data and drill down into it for fantastic results**

**Malcolm Duckett, Speed-Trap**

The online business of hotel booking agency HotelConnect accounts for 75 per cent of its total custom. Given this, combined with the competitive nature of the travel industry and the need for exemplary customer service, the company decided to analyse activity on its seven sites over the past two years using Speed-Trap software and analytics.

Speed-Trap's analysis has caused a sea-change in the way HotelConnect analyses its marketing campaigns, resulting in improvements to site usability. Previously, HotelConnect had faced the

problem that only ten per cent of the entire site could be monitored.

"For every destination we offer, we have various hotel options, each of which has a number of pages. Before we even collected any data, we had to second guess which parts of the site were important to our customers," HotelConnect website manager, Georgi Donnell says. "With Speed-Trap, however, the tagging process is so simple. We could quickly deploy the software and we were immediately monitoring every page and every link, providing us with our first

real appreciation of the whole site's performance."

HotelConnect can now break down its customer base in a number of ways, including the number of people only browsing the site compared with those that purchase; how many times a user returns to the site before booking and how many options they consider before completing. This has led to the company overhauling its booking engine because the process was too lengthy.

"Now, booking takes place in only three steps and the conversion rate from browsing to booking has

increased dramatically," Donnell says.

After finding that visitors were looking for Christmas bargains in September and leaving when none were found, HotelConnect launched a Christmas campaign in September 2007, which quickly became the most popular area of the site.

Speed-Trap vice-president, operations and marketing, Malcolm Duckett, says: "The biggest plus point for HotelConnect was being able to take our high-level data and drill down into it for fantastic results."

directly involved with the online side of the business. Which is why CADinteractive has launched a usability tool, Customer Insight Intelligence, which helps project managers analyse site performance and outline proposed solutions to senior management. According to Averill, the system of regular reports is more cost-effective than the in-depth lab-based tests required after something goes wrong and the problem has escalated.

Customer Insight Intelligence, currently being used by BT Vision, reviews website information to produce reports pinpointing usability and accessibility problems. Shaileen Joshi, senior marketing manager, customer channels at BT Vision, says: "The reports have helped us to clearly identify the areas for improvement within the website and the reporting process enabled us with the approval we needed to make the changes."

Similar systems include Tealeaf CX, which is used by TUI UK to acquire real-time insight into everything that happens on its Thompson holiday booking website. Tealeaf UK country manager, John Lillie, is adamant that the best customer online experience can only be achieved by being able to pinpoint problems when they occur and find solutions quickly. "TUI UK is immediately alerted to any problem within the site that prevents customers from completing bookings," he says.

While usability currently focuses on how people can find information and buy online, Nigel Grace, managing director of Human Factors Europe, believes the transformation of the web from a company-centric information channel to a social user-experience model means that, in future, web usability will need to expand to analysing users' emotional responses to sites. He concludes: "The difference will be assessing whether users will want to do something as opposed to simply being able to do it. Understanding emotional design and persuasive architecture is the new challenge for usability practitioners who are now becoming user-experience practitioners." ■

## Macmillan benefits from revamp

In 2006, Macmillan Cancer Support overhauled its website and added new material including information on cancer diagnosis, cancer types, treatments, health services and online discussion groups.

The material was well received and visitors to the site increased dramatically. However, Macmillan wanted a greater understanding about how users interact with the site and how usable it was. In June 2007 therefore, Macmillan hired Webcredible to run usability testing.

Webcredible managing director, Trenton Moss, says: "We recruited 12 users and set them tasks viewed from behind a two-way mirror and with an eye-tracking service to evaluate how the site worked from a visitor point of view. The research to understand the needs and

motivations of users was done through in-depth questionnaires to 20 subjects, which produces strategy to build upon. Everything developed was tested again and the process to determine the site's success is ongoing."

Webcredible was selected for the £50,000 project following a competitive five-way pitch. Following the extensive studies, Macmillan has now begun to implement Webcredible's recommendations and has already seen significant benefits, especially with an

increase in traffic to important areas for site users, which had previously been difficult to locate."

Macmillan Cancer Support head of new media, Katie Smith, says: "While the new material on the website is a great success, it resulted in a lot of pressure on the site and it's crucial that users can find the information they require quickly and easily. Therefore, we took the time to work with Webcredible to get a clear view of where our site functioned well and areas where usability could be improved."



Macmillan: wanted to know how users interacted