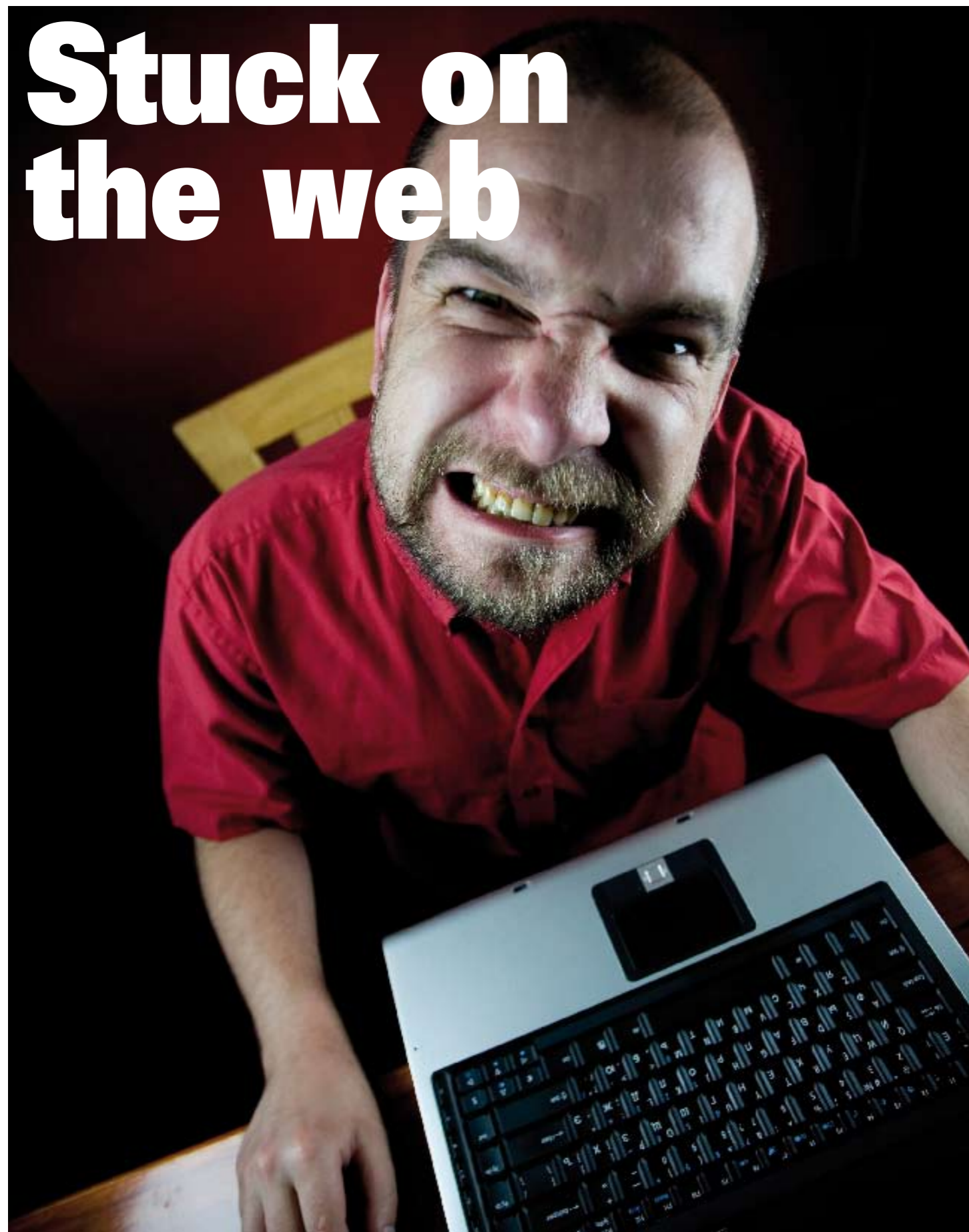


How do utility websites stand up to cross-examination? *Utility Week* commissioned two pieces of research to find out • Karma Ockenden reports

# Stuck on the web



Get me out of here: as users' expectations have risen about the ease of use of the internet, they are less prepared to put up with badly designed websites

With something like half the population of the UK now hooked up to the internet, the quality of utility websites is crucial for, among other things, customer acquisition, retention and service. None of us expect utilities to be at the forefront of e-evolution, but are their sites at least useable? To find out, *Utility Week* commissioned two sets of research: usability specialist Webcredible scrutinised, rated and ranked individual utility offerings, while market researcher Accent gathered a group of customers together to try and test sites from a user point of view. While, unsurprisingly, the experts are more critical of the sector's efforts, both pieces of research show there is clear room for improvement.

MANY UTILITY websites are failing on basic usability criteria. This is the stark message from web design specialist Webcredible, which emerges from research it undertook for *Utility Week*.

In August, Webcredible visited the sites of the big six energy suppliers and big 11 water companies (the ten English and Welsh water and wastewater firms plus Scottish Water) and evaluated each against 20 best practice guidelines, devised using its extensive experience of usability testing. These ranged from the general – for example on navigation and form completion – to the industry-specific – for example, concerning switching and giving meter readings online. Each site was scored from 0 to 5 on each guideline, with 5 being the maximum. With 20 guidelines in total, each site ended up with a Usability Index rating out of 100.

The ease with which customers can use company sites is vital in many ways. According to Webcredible: "If users can't find the information they need, they'll switch off and pick up the phone – or worse still they won't bother at all." For utilities, a tricky site could mean a higher cost to serve, a disgruntled and possibly vocal customer, a damaged brand and, in the worst case, lost business.

Yet Webcredible's overall finding was that "quite simply, the 17 websites in this report aren't doing enough to provide the best possible online experience to their users... many sites scored poorly with basic usability fundamentals." To be fair to the few, there was a vast discrepancy between the best and worst performing companies (see table). Surprisingly given their competitive dimension, energy sites did not drastically outperform water sites.

EDF Energy topped the energy ranking with an overall score of 72 per cent, followed by Npower at 68 per cent. British Gas and Scottish and Southern Energy trailed, with 41 and 40 per cent respectively. In water, Severn Trent was top with 70 per cent and Scottish Water bottom with 33 per cent. Of the English and Welsh companies, South West Water, Anglian Water and Wessex Water were joint bottom with 50 per cent. Webcredible says: "With only four websites scoring over 60 per cent and so many scoring around 50 per cent, it's clear that [even] the leading energy and water supply websites have significant scope to improve the usability of their online offering."

As for specifics, the first area scrutinised by the expert was utilities' home pages. Firms fared well on having a prominent "Contact us" link with phone number and hours of operation

displayed. Webcredible believes users typically go to corporate sites to find such information, so considers it of high importance. Only British Gas and ScottishPower of all 17 firms scored less than 3 out of 5 here.

The sector did less well on the homepage front on providing strong (visually clear with consistent formatting on each page) "calls to action" to main tasks such as giving a meter reading or paying a bill. The average score was 1.7 out of 5, with only ScottishPower achieving more than 3. Webcredible says: "This is surprising and worrying, as users go to these sites with key tasks in mind. Often the main content area was taken up with marketing information instead of the key calls to action."

This is interesting given that the energy companies fared pretty poorly in the switching category. The average industry score for providing an easy-to-use quote and price savings

foster customer trust. Npower scored the maximum again, with all others scoring below 3. Perhaps we are to read from this that energy companies have become reliant on customers coming to them via price comparison sites such as Uswitch?

Given the absence of domestic competition in water, it is perhaps less surprising, but nevertheless disappointing, that water company websites don't go out of their way to welcome new customers – for example, home-movers. Just three companies – United Utilities, Welsh Water and Scottish Water – did a good job of displaying in advance a checklist of what information would be required for sign-up. Webcredible warns the industry, which only managed an average 1.5 out of 5, that "there's nothing worse for web users than to spend 5-10 minutes filling in a form only to find out they don't have all the information they need".

As far as explaining why certain personal or ambiguous information is required (Webcredible reckons this can make the difference between users filling out a form or resorting to more costly enquiry avenues), the industry average score of 2 out of 5 masks the division between sites scoring 4 (Southern, Yorkshire, United, Welsh and Anglian) and the rest scoring 0. Only Thames scored the average 2.

Webcredible also calls on water companies to "urgently" address their unanimous failure to provide a noticable and easy-to-understand "progress" bar for customers signing up. This should be easy to spot, have the appearance of a process flow and highlight the user's current location. No site scored a point here.

It was better news on "proceed" buttons, though, which take users from one step of the sign-up process to the next. Most companies had taken care to ensure that their "proceed" commands had a different colour to everything else on the page, were surrounded by plenty of white space, and had identical formatting throughout.

As far as online forms are concerned, it was a mixed picture. Webcredible encourages forms to be well laid out, with labels right aligned and date fields easy to use. It's not

*continued overleaf*

**“Many utility websites scored poorly with basic usability fundamentals”**

calculator was 2.7 out of 5. Webcredible says it "simply isn't good enough" that top scorers Powergen, Scottish and Southern, Npower and EDF Energy managed only 3 out of 5.

Results were polarised on providing a good explanation of the switching process to customers before sign up, important for shaping and managing expectations. EDF Energy and Npower hit the maximum of 5 here, but all the others scored 0. It was a similar story on clearly naming and describing tariff options – something Webcredible believes helps to

## Utility website Useability Index

| Company                      | Website   | Total score |
|------------------------------|---|-------------|
| <b>Energy suppliers</b>      |   |             |
| EDF                          | <a href="http://www.edfenergy.com">http://www.edfenergy.com</a>                       | 72.0        |
| Npower                       | <a href="http://www.npower.com/">http://www.npower.com/</a>                           | 68.0        |
| ScottishPower                | <a href="http://www.scottishpower.co.uk/">http://www.scottishpower.co.uk/</a>         | 51.0        |
| Powergen                     | <a href="http://www.powergen.co.uk/">http://www.powergen.co.uk/</a>                   | 50.0        |
| British Gas                  | <a href="http://www.house.co.uk/">http://www.house.co.uk/</a>                         | 41.0        |
| Scottish and Southern Energy | <a href="http://www.scottish-southern.co.uk/">http://www.scottish-southern.co.uk/</a> | 40.0        |
| <b>Water suppliers</b>       |   |             |
| Severn Trent                 | <a href="http://www.stwater.co.uk/">http://www.stwater.co.uk/</a>                     | 70.0        |
| Northumbrian                 | <a href="http://www.nwl.co.uk/">http://www.nwl.co.uk/</a>                             | 63.0        |
| Southern                     | <a href="http://www.southernwater.co.uk/">http://www.southernwater.co.uk/</a>         | 58.0        |
| Thames                       | <a href="http://www.thameswater.co.uk/">http://www.thameswater.co.uk/</a>             | 56.0        |
| Yorkshire                    | <a href="http://www.yorkshirewater.com/">http://www.yorkshirewater.com/</a>           | 56.0        |
| United Utilities             | <a href="http://www.unitedutilities.com/">http://www.unitedutilities.com/</a>         | 55.0        |
| Dwr Cymru                    | <a href="http://www.dwrcymru.com/">http://www.dwrcymru.com/</a>                       | 52.0        |
| Southwest                    | <a href="http://www.southwestwater.co.uk/">http://www.southwestwater.co.uk/</a>       | 50.0        |
| Anglian                      | <a href="http://www.anglianwater.co.uk/">http://www.anglianwater.co.uk/</a>           | 50.0        |
| Wessex                       | <a href="http://www.wessexwater.co.uk/">http://www.wessexwater.co.uk/</a>             | 50.0        |
| Scottish                     | <a href="http://www.scottishwater.co.uk/">http://www.scottishwater.co.uk/</a>         | 33.0        |
| <b>Average score</b>         |   | <b>53.8</b> |

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difficult for users to be foxed, it says, given there is "a myriad of ways a date can be written. Separating the date field into three separate input fields saves users from working out whether to use spaces/hyphens/dashes to separate the date, month and year." Utilities scored between 2 and 4 out of 5 here. One of the biggest problems was hard-to-use date fields.

Elsewhere on forms, energy firms are very poor at clearly indicating which fields are compulsory for users to fill (commonly indicated with an asterisk) and which are optional. Only Npower scored more than 3 here, although six water firms managed to score 3 or more.

Conversely, water fared much worse than energy on providing help to users on form filling via a question mark or similar icon. Only Yorkshire and Scottish and Southern scored 3 or above here, while half of all energy providers achieved this level. On error handling, only Severn Trent, Northumbrian, Anglian, Npower, Powergen and British Gas managed to inform customers of a problem immediately and clearly, and provide helpful messages next to erroneous items.

Refreshingly, both sectors did well on enabling customers to input a meter reading online, with an average score of 3.5. Only British Gas, United Utilities, Welsh and Wessex scored poorly.

Most also did well on providing help to customers who may be unsure how to read a meter, via a clickable question mark or similar icon. The industry average score here was 3.9, with all but ScottishPower, Scottish and Southern, Anglian and Wessex achieving maximum points. According to Webcredible: "As an important reason for visiting the site, it could be argued that 'Help on finding a meter reading' warrants its own navigation item with clear instructions and diagrams provided on-page."

Finally, as far as site navigation is concerned, utilities can hold their heads up. With the exception of five sites which scored poorly (Powergen, British Gas, Scottish and Southern, Yorkshire and Welsh), all scored well on providing a clear, concise site map. "If users decide to look at a site map, they're probably lost," Webcredible says, "so it's important that the site map is called 'site map' with a clear link to it on each and every page."

With an average score of 3.9 out of 5, utilities also scored well on providing users with clear orientation clues so they know where they are within a section of the site and can see what other sort of information is available. Five water and two energy suppliers managed to score maximum marks here.

Most sites also did well on providing a "search" box in an obvious and consistent place on every page – important because users can be put off if they can't easily find what they are looking for. The industry as a whole scored 3.6 out of 5, which is a respectable score. But Webcredible notes: "It's a fairly basic requirement to have and the fact that two energy supplier sites [EDF Energy and Npower] scored 0 for this and two water supplier sites [Yorkshire and South West] scored 0 and 1 for this respectively isn't encouraging."

● For more information, email: [info@webcredible.co.uk](mailto:info@webcredible.co.uk). Tel: 0870 242 6095. The full can be downloaded at: [www.webcredible.co.uk/utility](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/utility)

## Rob Sheldon asked a group of customers what they thought of utilities' websites



# You, the jury

**A**ccent recently conducted a consumer survey specifically for *Utility Week* to explore the functionality of websites from the big six energy suppliers – British Gas, Powergen, Npower, EDF Energy, ScottishPower and Scottish and Southern Energy. Comparison websites were also tested – Uswitch, Moneysupermarket.com, Simplyswitch, Switchyouenergy and Energywatch.

Participants were asked to perform a series of functional tasks on three different websites. For example, they were asked to find suppliers' contact details or where on the site to key in an up-to-date meter reading. The first website that participants were asked to view was that of a utility supplier they did not use, chosen randomly from the six suppliers. The second website was their own utility provider and the third was a comparison site. Throughout the tasks the participants were questioned about their views and opinions surrounding their journey through the website and their overall experience.

Finding company contact details was completed successfully by all, and most of the participants achieved this with an average of 2.4 clicks. Switching between suppliers was also completed reasonably well. However, finding details about how to compare tariffs proved to be a more difficult and time-consuming task. Of those who managed to compare tariffs successfully, the average was three clicks. However, only half of the people successfully managed to compare tariffs. The others

became frustrated and gave up, leading to a perception that the supplier "had something to hide".

When the participants were asked to view their own provider's website, there was a large variety in the length of time taken to complete the tasks. Participants were given 14 tasks to complete, including viewing their account, querying a bill and paying a bill. These actions took four or less clicks to complete. Other tasks proved more problematic and on some occasions took numerous clicks to finish.

### Meanwhile, in Spain...

Spanish utility websites are about as uninspiring as those in the UK, says Carlos Sirera Gracia.

The Spanish electricity and gas market has a strong commercial orientation. In light of this, in its *Report on the Energy and Utilities Sector on the Internet*, Capgemini sought to measure the evolution of the sector's presence online. The study compares the respondent companies' leverage of the web as a commercial tool and assesses strong and weak points of their web strategies.

With the exceptions of Canal de Isabel II (a water company), Repsol YPF and Iberdrola, which obtained balanced grades in most of the criteria employed, Capgemini was perplexed to discover widespread poor attention to the areas it had identified

as crucial. These included: **Aesthetics.** Total and Iberdrola came out on top for aesthetic quality because the graphic elements they used were consistent between pages. But most companies tended to use colour on a white background to clear pages from visual loading, convey a sensation of purity and transparency, and avoid promotions with a high visual impact. **Brand impact.** Water company sites performed poorly here. However, it should be noted that Canal de Isabel II is one of the most outstanding sites in this section, together with Iberdrola and Total.

**Navigation.** It was a mixed bag on contents architecture and navigation, ranging from the likes of BP and Enagas, which provided clear navigation and intuitive classification, to those that barely fulfilled some of the basic

any of these sites before. The general impression of the comparison sites was good and the comments received were fairly positive. The participants suggested the sites were easy to navigate, user friendly, provided a solution and gave a clear overview of the market.

The research also highlighted several areas of general concern that suppliers should take note of. For example, if too much information is presented to the customer it was often viewed negatively. Participants preferred clean, simple websites that did not contain too

much copy. Curiously, colour, while not a critical issue, was something that several of the participants mentioned. Strong, bright colours were popular, while darker, more subtle colours were often commented upon negatively.

Another main area of concern is in the navigation and labelling of different sections of the sites. This often proved confusing if it wasn't what the user was expecting and sometimes led the user to other websites such as corporate websites or "lookalike sites" unconnected with the company in question.

All of the websites included in the survey required participants to set up an online account and then login. This is a widely-used security measure. However, some of the participants felt the account set up process was time consuming and therefore perceived it as a deterrent. In addition, some participants still had major concerns over the security of their personal details being transmitted. Utilities should investigate what levels of security are needed to deliver an experience that reassures without deterring.

Other feelings expressed focused on the utility companies not completely understanding who was visiting their website and not understanding the target audience. As a result, some users expressed confusion about some sites. Were they corporate sites? Were they aimed at new or existing customers?

From the research conducted it is clear that most participants were generally able to complete the tasks well and within a reasonable timescale, and most were generally fairly satisfied with their online experience. However, the research indicates further refinement of the online experience offered by utilities companies would be welcome. With so much information and so much functionality to present to the customer, it is very easy for companies to get the mix wrong and to assume that the customer is as knowledgeable about their business as they are.

There is clearly a suggestion that some utility company websites would benefit from being simplified further, with information offered in a clearer way and with more obvious differentiation between areas on the sites.

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prerequisites.

**Usability.** Thus, Canal de Isabel II, BP and Shell were the easiest sites to use.

**Accessibility** (ensuring different types of people, including those with disabilities, can use the site). Some organisations paid due diligence to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines but the overall situation was deficient. This is surprising, given the current legal scene and the recent creation of recognised accessibility certificates. One of the most common mistakes was low contrasts between text and background. The sites that can be used by the widest variety of people were Enagas, Iberdrola, Canal de Isabel II and Aguas de Sevilla. Repsol YPF and Gas Natural provided the most language options.

**Content.** Repsol YPF, Gas Natural and Iberdrola provided the best quality content

and information about their companies and products and services.

**Commercial strategy.** Most sites seem to prioritise static institutional information over other more attractive, dynamic commercial content. This indicates that these companies are not motivated to promote user participation, which is short-sighted. That said, Repsol YPF, Endesa and Gas Natural have developed the best commercial strategies.

**Inspiring user trust.** Sites were polarised here, with BP and Canal de Isabel II obtaining the highest grades.

**Help.** The best sites for providing help to users were Canal de Isabel II and Aguas de Las Palmas.

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