UTILITYWEEK

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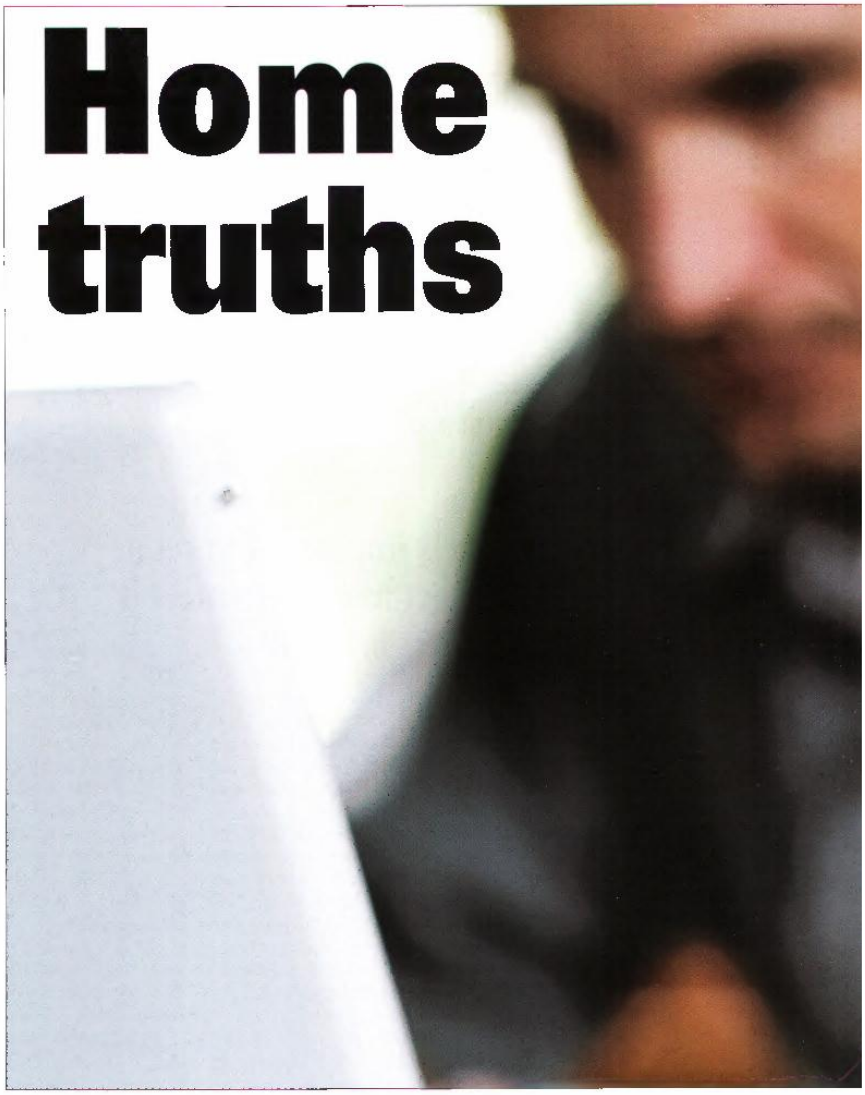
An expert survey of 17 utility websites found that many sti



More and more the UK population is turning to the internet as a key source of information. Energy and water supplier websites should develop in line with this expectation, fulfilling user needs and streamlining communications with customers.

However, this drive to embrace online communications prematurely without also taking advantage of usability best practice can mean that key services are let down by hard-to-use sites.

Increasing the useability of any website will increase the success users have in finding the information they need – it is as simple as that. Improved useability will also lead to an increase in channel loyalty and return site visitors, and an improvement in the perception of the online and offline brand.

With this in mind, internet consultancy Webcredible analysed 17 utility websites to assess how good they were in terms of their useability. Included in the survey were the big six energy suppliers plus 11 water companies. The latter category comprised the ten big water and sewerage companies of England and Wales plus Scottish Water. The survey was carried out earlier this month.

The websites were assessed according to 20 criteria such as the prominence given to essential information, the ease with which meter readings could be given, how easy it was to navigate through the site and so on. Water companies were additionally assessed on how easy it was for new customers to sign up, while energy companies were assessed on the ease of the switching process. In all, each site was judged on 20 criteria and awarded a score of 0 to 5 for each, with 5 being the highest. The total score was therefore out of 100, and this gave the Usability Index of that site (see table on facing page).

It is clear that utility websites are improving, and this year the average score was 58.7 per cent. But in spite of these improvements it is clear that energy and water supply company websites have significant scope to improve the usability of their online offerings.

The potential benefits and cost savings of getting users online can be realised only if the sites sign up to delivering a first class user experience. If users cannot find the information they need they will switch off and pick up the phone, or worse, they will lose interest in the company altogether.

It is important, for instance, to have a prominent "Contact us" link with phone number and hours of operation, particularly on the homepage. This is basic stuff, but the energy websites did not fare well on this measure, with only two companies scoring 3 or more out of 5. The water companies did considerably better, with only one company scoring less that 3 out of 5 (and five companies scoring 5 out of 5). The average score across all 17 utilities was 2.9 out of 5.

Also basic is an understanding of the key functions of a website, and providing an easy route for users to find the sections dealing with those functions. The main goals for utilities are for users to pay online, give a meter reading, get a quote, view prices or (in the case of energy) switch supplier. As such, it is crucial that every page within the relevant section have a very strong "call-to-action".

The call-to-action should visually stand out from the text on the page and should be formatted the same way on each page. It should, however, be formatted differently to all other items on the page so that it really stands out.

Overall, the websites scored poorly for providing this kind of support. Often the main content area (the homepage) was taken up with marketing information instead of the key calls-to-action, but sites appear to be aware that a change is needed.

Webcredible has looked at utility websites before and there were areas of significant improvement in this year's survey, such as not requiring customers to register to perform key tasks (average score 4.1 out of 5) and having the "Search" field in an obvious and consistent place on every page (4.0 out of 5).

However, in other areas the websites surveyed showed a disappointing lack of sophistication. Before entering into any process on a website, it is now widely recognised that the user's expectations should be clearly set out. For instance, when signing up to a water supplier a variety of information is required which the user may well not have to hand unless forewarned. Getting half way through filling out a form only to find out there is an unexpected requirement for information such as bank account details or meter reading is very irritating. However, of the 17 utilities surveyed, only one scored anything at all, giving an average score of 0.5 out of 5 for this criteria.

Similarly, the average score was only 2.1 out of 5 when it came to displaying a noticeable and easy to understand progress bar. When it comes to setting expectations within any web transaction, a progress bar is a great way of feeding back to users where they are, where they have been and where they are going.

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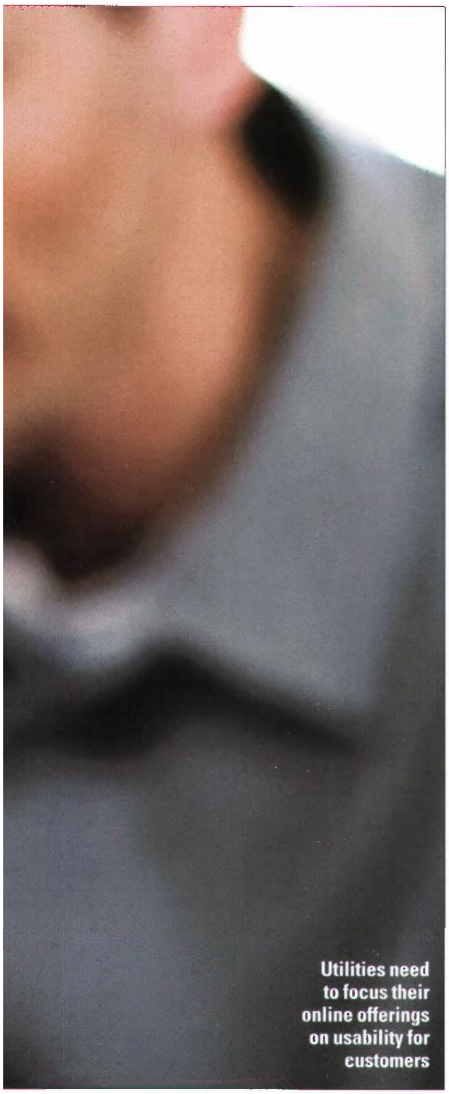

Utilities need to focus their online offerings on usability for customers

Even if there is one page to a form, this fact should be highlighted at the top of the page, for instance as "Page 1 of 1".

Few sites used long, multiple page forms, but those that did failed to score highly for this guideline, implying that care must be taken with this. Those sites using one-page forms often failed to explain that there was only one page of the form, and the resulting forms were often long and laborious. Only one site scored 4 out of 5 here, Southern Water.

Other areas where utilities scored particularly badly (averaging less than 2 out of 5) was in "providing contextual help where appropriate" (1.5 out of 5), "providing a good explanation of the switching process before signing up" (1.7 out of 5) and "employing effective error handling" (1.7 out of 5).

The latter criteria is important because web users often make errors when completing online forms. Error handling is an important yet often overlooked part of any online form process. If users have made an error on a form they need to be informed immediately that there is a problem. This written description summarising the errors should be presented at the top of the page, so it is the first thing they see after submitting the form page.

In addition, a helpful message should also be provided next to each erroneous item. This is because if the error occurs in a long form, then below the fold when users scroll down they will be unable to see the error summary at the top of the page. Likewise, if the error summary is provided as an alert pop-up then there is no reminder as to what the error was when the alert is closed.

The websites struggled with this, with only one scoring 4 out of 5, Northumbrian Water. This needs to be massively improved because web users often have problems with forms.

There were criteria where utilities had clearly taken best practice advice onboard, and they scored highly accordingly. When it came to providing easy-to-use quote and price savings calculators, the average score was 3.3 out of 5, for instance. Likewise, the average score was 3.4 out of 5 when it came to clearly indicating which were required fields and which were optional. Navigation labels were easy to understand (average score 3.4 out of 5), the current tariff was easy to find (3.5 out of 5) and a simple site map, called "site map" was offered (average score 3.7 out of 5).

On the latter category, all six energy companies got 5 out of 5, but only half the water companies did. Many used names other than site map, which users may struggle to find because it is different from their expectations.

With so much of the UK population coming online, the opportunity for energy and water suppliers to increase their website audience contact, especially with hard to reach groups, is huge. Usability will undoubtedly prove to be a key factor in the success of the online channel, particularly when it comes to transactional support for key user services.

According to Webcredible, most of the 17 websites it surveyed are not doing enough to provide the best possible online experience for their users. Improvements have been made on previous years, but with the average score still in the 50s, further improvement can easily be made. Many of the energy sites, for instance, scored poorly with basic usability fundamentals. ■

Often the homepage was taken up with marketing information instead of calls-to-action

For more information, tel: 0870 242 6095.
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Utility website Useability Index

Company	Website	Total score
Energy suppliers		
EDF	www.edfenergy.com	76.0
Npower	www.npower.com	75.0
British Gas	www.britishgas.co.uk	64.0
SSE	www.southern-electric.co.uk www.swalec.co.uk www.hydro.co.uk	61.0
ScottishPower	www.scottishpower.co.uk	57.0
Eon UK	www.eonenergy.com	54.0
Water suppliers		
Southern	www.southernwater.co.uk	77.0
United Utilities	www.unitedutilities.com	65.0
Thames	www.thameswater.co.uk	64.0
Severn Trent	www.stwater.co.uk	61.0
Northumbrian	www.nwl.co.uk	57.0
Anglian	www.anglianwater.co.uk	56.0
Wessex	www.wessexwater.co.uk	55.0
Yorkshire	www.yorkshirewater.com	52.0
Southwest	www.southwestwater.co.uk	51.0
Dwr Cymru	www.dwrcymru.com	41.0
Scottish	www.scottishwater.co.uk	32.0
Average score		**58.9**