

My Genius

guide to Online Retail

How to increase the
Usability of your website



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The usability of a web site inevitably has a major impact on the revenue it generates. A site that's transparent and easy to use will have higher conversion rates, fewer abandoned baskets, and will generate more repeat business.

A webcredible report in 2008 (Ecommerce usability for UK High Street) showed that whilst there had been some improvements, sites typically scored relatively low for not highlighting delivery costs at the beginning of the process (score was 3.5 out of 5), not showing similar or complementary products (3.6 out of 5), not giving the ability to change the number of products displayed per results page (1.2 out of 5) and visited links to products don't change colour to show they've been visited (0.2 out of 5)



Usability isn't the only factor in generating revenue, of course. You have to get customers to your site in the first place, and you have to offer the products, prices and services they're looking for. Once customers arrive, however, usability plays a leading role in what happens next. Here are some tips on making your website easier to use than your competitors' – so your customers keep coming back for more.

1. Make navigation quick and easy

It sounds obvious, but it's one of the most common mistakes online retailers make. Don't make customers click through too many pages to find what they want, and many more to complete the checkout process. Customers will abandon your site if it all takes too long. Your aim is to let customers move through the process easily, without thinking about it, so they can focus on shopping rather than learning how your website works.





Don't forget that customers may not be thinking in terms of your product categories. How this affects your navigation depends on your business. For example, if you sell jewellery, you probably know that a high percentage of your turnover is for gifts. The logical thing to do is to offer navigation by occasion, by whom the gift is intended for, and by price – as well as by categories like gold/silver, rings/pendants/watches, and so on.

The other key thing to consider is where the navigation should be on the screen. Most customers are used to one main scheme: high level navigation at the top, and sub-categories on the left.

Bucking this trend might make your site look different and stand out from the crowd, but if it takes potential customers more than a few seconds to understand the navigation, they're more likely to go to another site.

The same is true of the checkout process. Make it clear, make it simple and keep clicks to a minimum. As Steve Krug says: don't make them think.



2. Don't hide information that customers want to see

Hiding essential information is a common mistake. For example, one of the most common causes of abandoned baskets is hiding delivery options and related costs until a customer goes through the checkout process. Make sure customers can find this information wherever they are in the ordering process.

You'll need to give some thought as to whether you offer free delivery (including the delivery cost in the price of the product) or offer a range of delivery options. Do you offer next-day delivery for a premium? Can you guarantee delivery on a certain day? If all the goods aren't available immediately, do you charge once or more than once?

Another key mistake is misleading customers about last order dates, particularly in the run up to major shopping milestones such as Christmas. If you let a customer down you'll lose their trust for ever, so show the last order date clearly, ideally on your home page as well as on key ordering pages.

Inventory information is another example. Don't make customers go through the entire ordering process, entering their information and clicking 'confirm', only to be told the product isn't in stock. There are few better ways to earn their disrespect.

3. Provide 'intelligent' search capabilities

'Intelligent' search capabilities are increasingly important on any retail website. While your navigation should be designed to respond to customer needs as far as possible, you can never second-guess every possible customer requirement. An effective search capability lets customers find the products they want, whether they come to your site with a need you haven't predicted or simply don't have time to browse through your site structure.

'Intelligent' searching means providing relevant search results, quickly. It means being able to handle common spelling or typing mistakes, and being able to interpret related words – for example, returning results with 'oven' and 'stove' in the description when a customer searches for 'cookers'. Intelligent search results will automatically place popular items at the top and show helpful buying prompts, such as 'customers who bought this, also bought...'

4. Keep the home page fresh

Your home page is the single most important page on your website. Like a shop window, you have to keep it fresh, current and relevant to your customers. How you do this depends on exactly what you're selling, but there are some common approaches every online retailer should consider.

Seasonality

Customers shop differently online at different times of year. Your homepage must be tailored to holidays, seasons, events and other purchasing milestones.

Topicality

Being up-to-date isn't just about changing your home page for the Christmas season. It's always worth considering current events, hot consumer topics and competitor activities as a source of fresh home page content.



Multichannel marketing

You don't just need to promote your online activities on your home page. Linking with print, TV and radio, and actively promoting other channels on your home page, doesn't just help drive sales through those channels: it enhances your reputation as a broad footprint retailer that offers choice to its customers.

Trends and goals

You should evaluate your online activities constantly, looking for patterns in things like conversion rates, average order value and number of visitors, as well as keeping track of e-commerce design and functionality trends in the wider market.

Keeping your website fresh shouldn't mean having to redesign your whole site on a regular basis. With the right e-commerce platform you can change the look and feel of your site quickly and easily via the use of different skins.

5. Always test changes properly

We all think we know what our customers want. It's human nature to assume that people will like the same things we do, and use websites in the same way. However, that isn't necessarily the case, which is why testing is absolutely critical. The most popular form of testing at the moment is 'multivariate' or 'A/B split' testing, which basically tracks how well one concept or product does versus another. For example, you might feature one product or feature on your home page between 8am and noon, and another between noon and 4 pm, to see what converts better. This of course relies on having effective analytics.

A word of warning: don't add too many new features at the same time. It makes testing more difficult and can overwhelm visitors to your site, particularly repeat customers who are familiar with the way the site used to be.

6. Be prepared for heavy traffic

As the speed of your site decreases, so too does its usability. Research shows that 33 per cent of dissatisfied online shoppers attribute their unhappiness to slow website performance. Some 28 per cent attribute negative feelings to error messages they receive during the shopping process, and more than a third of dissatisfied shoppers will abandon the site altogether.

You must be prepared for spikes in traffic, especially leading up to key holiday periods. According to IMRG, the Interactive Media in Retail Group, the biggest shopping day during the Christmas 2008 season was 8th December, between 1pm to 2pm. If your site grinds to a halt during these busy periods you'll miss out on a large slice of lucrative seasonal pie.

7. Listen to your customers

Don't be afraid to ask your customers for feedback. They can offer some of the best advice and ideas available. Simple feedback mechanisms like polls and forms can work wonders, and when you act on the results you give customers another reason to trust your site and your service.

8. Make it accessible – and not just for users with disabilities

Your website must adhere to the W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) if you're not to fall foul of the Disability Discrimination Act. It's not a 'nice to have': it's a requirement. However, accessibility isn't just about enabling people with disabilities to use your site. There is growing recognition that following the W3C guidelines will make your site easier for everyone to use. Accessible content tends to be more visible to search engines, too.

In conclusion...

The online shopping scene was dominated by price-conscious consumers for many years. Today, however, the real value is delivered by online retailers who can make life easier for shoppers who are increasingly pressed for time. In fact, it's estimated that more than 70 percent of people who shop online do so because it's easier than shopping other ways. Keep that statistic in mind when you evaluate your site navigation, checkout experience and on-line search facilities.





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