

Creating user-friendly websites

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As we move towards broadband as the standard, multimedia websites are becoming the norm rather than the exception. If done well, sound, video and animation will enrich a user's experience. The opposite is also true for bad designs and this is a sure way to ruin your reputation fast. Here are six tips that will help you simplify the way you deliver information to users.



1. Know your audience

In the last decade since the Internet has become a widely used tool, people have become used to a degree of technical jargon. Words like hyperlink, bandwidth, HTML and scroll bar no longer scare them. This in turn has web designers and developers including all kinds of geek-speak on their sites.

The biggest mistake developers can make is to assume understanding. Our primary job description is to solve communication and information problems by making relevant information available in the most appropriate and simple way.

2. Use an application only if it benefits the user

Just keeping up with new technological advances is not the answer. The first and foremost decision should be about what is needed for the site to perform at optimal level. Keep the user in mind and don't automatically go for the newest flashiest innovation. Balance should always be top of mind when it comes to useful and innovative.

How often have you clicked onto a site and the first page is a flash intro page? Nothing wrong with that, except for the skip button at the bottom. Why waste the user's time by creating an unnecessary page and an option to skip it? If there is a skip button, most people will use it.

The fancier the design, the more likely it is that the user will get confused or bored. Instructions are better read and

understood in a bullet-point format and should take no longer than a few seconds.

3. Choice

The majority of users still operate from a dial-up connection. There are still a lot more old computers and software in use than there are new machines. Make sure that alternative content is available for these users.

In our current online environment it is better to offer rich media as a supplement rather than a primary way of delivering information. So any kind of visual demonstration better contain a text version. This also assures that users with a hearing disability will be able to use the site.

If you have to use multimedia, make sure it's a common system found in the software of most machines and will appeal to a broader audience. Also provide non-multimedia content as an alternative so that users have a choice.

4. Status indicators

I don't mind having to wait for a site to download but I am much more likely to stick around if I know how long it is going to take. The only two requirements are to keep it simple and accurate.

Users are often not sure if a page is frozen and will leave without trying to figure it out. Show them that 65% has loaded and they will wait for the remaining 35%.

5. Always underestimate the users' technical knowledge

Fear of viruses still reign supreme. When the word download is mentioned you see fear in people's eyes. Add upgrade to this and you are assured that the bulk of the users have gone. People often assume that there is a charge to download and if it is done via a dial-up it takes too long anyway.

6. Detect users' bandwidth

When presented with a screen on which the user needs to select a bandwidth speed for their multimedia playback, most don't know and just guess. Make it easier by detecting the users' speed at the back end and then setting a cookie value accordingly. It now allows the user to see the video with one less click.

Less choice affords quicker gratification. Very few users know the difference between QuickTime and Windows Media Player. Make the interface as simple as possible so that the video can simply be played.

If there are different video sizes available, simply call them "big" and "small". Make sure to indicate that the smaller version will download quicker. The user can now make an educated choice and have a rewarding experience.

The surest way to bring users back time after time is to under promise and over deliver. Keep studying your statistics and you will understand and grow with your audience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A keen follower of new developments in the electronic world, Janie Smit is senior new media producer at Touchline Media (www.touchline.co.za) and is very excited by the ongoing integration of web and print. She has been working in the new media environment for more than seven years and see it as the natural companion for any business.