

Is poor usability killing your business?

 By [Karen Parkin](#)

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Earlier this year I made a presentation entitled "Is Poor Usability Killing Your Business?" at the Marketing Indaba. This is not a facetious question. It is a question that goes to the core of the thinking behind any interactive product, whether it is your website or a mobile app.

The fundamental thing is that it is impossible to think about usability without focusing on the customer. So usability forces us to be customer-centric and it is this paradigm shift in our thinking that helps us look at what we do from the perspective of a customer.

Questions

This immediately raises questions about:

- customers' motivations
- the problems that they are looking to solve
- what is logical and makes sense to them
- where they would expect to find something
- how much time they are willing to give to struggle through forms before they get to their solution
- how they would go about looking for something, and
- how they respond to companies and what they are offering

In today's fast-paced world, people are impatient and intolerant and, if they can't find what they are looking for or if something doesn't work, then they simply move on to someone next door. The Internet is a great place for reaching massive markets and levels the playing fields, but it is unforgiving and ferociously competitive.

Set yourself apart

Setting yourself apart is the key to gaining customers and this is where usability is a weapon.

By focusing on what your customers need and delivering it in an easy and pleasing way, companies can distinguish their brand from others. There is so much scope for doing this, it is still surprising that there are so many 'me too' sites and experiences out there.

But, given the level of effort, skill and creativity that is required, maybe it is not so surprising after all. The devil is in the

detail. One cannot just throw a site together.

Why not try this test? Think about your customers. Who are they - who are they really? And then consider what tasks they perform on your site.

The self-test challenge

It can be a simple task such as contacting you, or it could be a complex task such as buying a product, making a booking, finding a service or a solution, getting help, finding out more about a specific product, or buying tickets. Be as specific as you can about whom the customer is and the task that they are performing.

Then, sit down, put yourself completely in the shoes of your customer, and complete the task. In most cases, this humbling exercise proves to us that people can't use our sites!

What have we done here? We have looked at the site by knowing the customer and being customer-centric. Then, and very importantly, we have looked at the site from the point of view of how tasks are performed.

Tool of the trade

There are tools of the trade that help us with this:

- **Personas** help us focus on the various different types of people who use the site. Yes, it's about segmenting our market. But it goes much further than that because it's about getting into the head of the customer as an individual, and identifying with them to understand what their pain points are, what they are looking for, what motivates them, and the psychology of their behaviour.

Personas are hypothetical archetypes we create to help us get insights into actual users and how they make decisions on our sites. While they are not real, they do represent real people and should be created through an analytical process.

- **Scenarios** describe a person's interaction with the site and come out of a deep understanding of the activities and tasks that people perform on a site.

Put together, personas and scenarios help us to focus on task requirements when designing an interface.

These are just two aspects of creating compelling user experiences. The design process starts with creating a strategy that defines the objectives of the site from a business and customer perspective. Then building on the strategy, the information architecture, content strategy and interaction design for the site are developed. These define the site structure, content taxonomy/organisation, navigation scheme and interactivity.

With a site firmly built on these foundations, the sky is the limit, and the impossible within grasp.

ABOUT KAREN PARKIN

Karen Parkin is co-founder and director of digital strategy and training company Britefire (www.britefire.co.za). She has been at the forefront of innovation through her whole career and she is at home in a world that is in a constant state of flux, uncertainty and invention. Contact her on tel +27 (0)21 790 0303, email karen.parkin@britefire.com, follow @karenoparkin on Twitter and connect on LinkedIn.

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