



wise bites

for those with a taste
for smart marketing



Is your website working hard enough?

Part I: First Impression and Ease of Navigation

In today's electronic world, having a website isn't a luxury, it's an expectation. No matter what business you're in, your customers and prospects expect to be able to find you on the internet. Other marketing tactics such as print, direct mail, media relations and advertising should always include your URL, driving traffic to your website "for more information." However, once that promise of information is made, you have an obligation to fulfill it.

Your website is the internet ambassador of your business -- both proponent and protector of your brand. It is your online customer service department, sales force, project/order tracker and public relations firm.

Are your customers getting everything they want from your site?

Website effectiveness can be measured any number of ways using any number of criteria. There are many "website effectiveness checklists" available online, some several hundred checkpoints long! Whether the list is streamlined or exhaustive, the basic elements of website effectiveness will usually occur in this sequence:

Awareness: The website's target audience must know the site exists.

Findability: Visitors must be able to find it when they want to.

Availability: The site must be available to them when they try to access it.

Popularity: To be effective for the owner, the site must attract a reasonable number of visitors.

Accessibility: Visitors must be able to access a downloaded page, even if they (or their computers) are impaired in some way.

Usability: Users must be able to easily navigate to the pages they need and perform the tasks they have come to perform (e.g., find information, make a purchase, etc.)

Trust: Users must have enough trust in the site and its owners to want to perform those tasks.

Fulfillment: Users' performance of the tasks should fulfill both their own needs and those of the site's owners. For example, any goods or services ordered online should arrive as promised. Otherwise, a lot of users won't make a second order.

Reputation: Each user's experience with the website should add to the positive reputation of the organization that owns the site.

Amazon.com is an example of a highly successful website that actually fails many of the "tests" found on a long checklist. The reason sites like Amazon.com are successful is not that they minimize the number of things they do badly. They do a few things very, very well. Above all, their websites earn the **trust** of their users.

Look at the subtleties of the way Amazon does business on the web, including "tone of voice", range of interactivity, and ease of search. Combined, these elements create certainty in the user's mind that "You can trust this site."

How does your site stack up?

For the purposes of this article, we've focused on two critical areas of web effectiveness: *First Impression* and *Ease of Navigation*. Future editions of WDC Wisebites will cover other criteria.

We'll assume (for now) your site is easy to find. Your URL is intuitive and related to your business name/purpose. You consistently rank high with search engines. Interested visitors are finding, even flocking to your website. That's great. Now here's the big question: Are they leaving happy and satisfied, or frustrated and discontent?

If you spend time online (and 74% of Americans* do) you've noticed that today's websites are much more information-dense than earlier sites. Graphic-heavy, copy-light pages (often called "brochure-ware" because they look like you've copied your company brochure and posted it online) are passé. They're as out of style as big hair and shoulder pads.

How about your website? Is it dated or does it employ current technology and Web 2.0 "best practices?" Is it user-centric, reflecting your commitment to capturing and keeping visitor interest?

The best way to tell is to put yourself in the user's shoes. In fact, it helps to compare your website against 2-3 similar websites. When gauged against the competition, you want yours to be the gold mine (and gold standard) of useful information, helpfulness and visitor satisfaction.

Here are some checklist items to consider when measuring ***first impression*** and ***ease of navigation***.

FIRST IMPRESSION

URL – Sure visitors can bookmark your site, but having a URL that closely relates to the name of your business and is not overly clever or incomprehensible will go a long way toward helping them find you in the first place!

Download Time – Flash and dash "splash pages" are yesterday's news. Today's savvy web users are too impatient to wait a whole minute or even 25 seconds for your home page to load, let alone a pre-home page! Make them wait and you'll turn them off – not only to your site, but to your business.

Home Page – All relevant information should be above the "fold" so visitors don't have to scroll. If you've got that much to say, put it in a link to a sub-page!

Depth of Information – Does your site look detail rich and comprehensive? Can a visitor scan the Home Page and quickly find an entry point to the information he/she came to find? Does your site entice the visitor to enter and learn more?

Readability – Is the language suitable for the web? Is information broken into readable paragraphs and bulleted lists? Your goal is to make the reader's job easy. Web users scan information. Write to their habits.

Look and Feel – Is the site pleasing to look at? Inviting? Or do the colors and graphics make it harder instead of easier to view?

Tag line – Is it clear what business you're in? A tagline or slogan makes it easy to define your industry or business segment and connect with customers emotionally.

Unique Selling Proposition (USP) or Value Proposition – Make it clear to the visitor that what your business offers is superior to — and more valuable to them — than the competition's offerings.

Credentials – Does your site present you as credible and trustworthy? Professional associations, certifications, awards – all validate your business and increase the visitor’s comfort level.

Contact Details – It should be clear right up front how to contact your business.

Here are two elements that **detract** from the overall impression of your site:

- Many sites have sections that are password protected, and that’s fine. But requiring visitors to register to even get into the site on their first visit can be a major roadblock.
- Please don’t make your visitors download software in order to participate in your site. They will very likely lose interest and go somewhere else!

EASE OF NAVIGATION

Modern websites are like personal information guides for visitors. A good website anticipates each visitor’s information needs and the order in which visitors may wish to access that information. Today, it’s all about the “user experience.” Here are some criteria to measure the effectiveness of your site’s **navigation**:

Navigational Links – The trend in websites used to be a simplified 5 to 6 button navigation bar with each button leading to a main section. From there, the site would “drill down” deeper and deeper. Today’s sites are more like a matrix. They employ multiple navigations right from the home page. All navigational links to-from the current page should be clearly visible on all pages.

Ease of use – This is a broad category, but truly essential. You want your visitor to be able to access, interact with and take action on any and all sections of your site without becoming lost or frustrated.

Site map – Every site has one. Making yours available for visitors to see is the equivalent of sharing a table of contents to a 3-dimensional book. Especially for large sites, the site map is an invaluable user resource.

Multi-directional navigation – There is nothing worse than getting stuck deep in a website and not being able to find your way back to the previous page, parent page of the section or another section all together!

Take me home -- Another website no-no is not having a “return home” button (or link) on every page.

Search – No longer considered a bells and whistles item, a search function is rapidly becoming another “expectation” of savvy web visitors. Today’s content management system (CMS)-driven sites make it a snap!

Links – Back to that multi-directional navigation suggestion: the more internal links you offer the better. A good website will be rich in both text links (also called hypertext – and denoted by underscored words) and graphic links (ALT tags).

If you would like more information on ways to update, expand or add functionality to your website, please contact Jean or Dina at Wiley Design Communications by emailing whatscooking@wileydesign.com or calling (916) 447-4633.

* Source: Internet World Stats Usage and Population Statistics. <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats2.htm>

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