



# THE WEB USER EXPERIENCE

## [ KICK IT UP A NOTCH! ]

BY SHERRY BUDZIAK

With more than 2 million new Web sites each month, users are demanding an online experience that is intuitive and engaging. So what happens when visiting their professional association's Web site doesn't measure up to their expectations? Will they try to look for information and services somewhere else or find new online social channels?

Does any of the following sound familiar?

- You know the information is there but your members keep calling or sending you e-mails saying they can't find it.
- The information on your Web site is outdated or has been deleted and is now missing.
- You know that your Web site could be better structured and you need to improve your information architecture but you don't know where to start.
- Your Web site content has grown so much that information is becoming difficult for staff to update.

If the answer to any of these is yes, then you should be thinking of conducting a Web site usability review. Fundamental to usability and creating successful user experiences is placing a strong focus on users. In many cases, we spend little time concentrating on the users. Yet, the users are critical to the success of your Web site.

Usability.gov defines usability as "the quality of a user's experience when interacting with a product or system — whether a Web site, a software application, mobile technology or any user-operated device. In general, usability refers to how

well users can learn and use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process."

Lorelei Brown, manager, user experience, for Realtors.org, says, "Our No. 1 concern is that we have content that is findable and usable for our members. If we don't write and organize information so that members can connect with it to solve their problems, we're not creating a service, we're just making a big pile of electronic paper."

"We keep our members as part of the process by listening to what they say not only when we do user testing, or surveys, but also by paying close attention to our analytics. We're learning a lot about how important it is to think carefully about using the user's language, and writing about issues in a way that will appeal to them. When we write headlines or articles that are too internally focused, we're carefully ignored. As we redesign our site, we bring this point to our internal stakeholders, to help them focus not only on good organization, but user relevance as well."

Conducting usability testing can provide you with insight on how your constituents are using your Web site, what is important to them and how they are thinking through the process of using your Web site.

Nothing can compare to the hands-on experience of watching real customers interact with your site. See where your users stumble, hear their frustrations and learn how to make the site better. Know what you hope to discover each time you test. With all tests you want to discover whether the user gets the point of



the page, understand the navigation system and can guess where to find things. In a general test, you want to know how do users interact with a Web site you are testing? What is difficult for people to do? Where do they get lost? What makes sense to them? What makes them feel insecure? What do they like and dislike?

### MEASURING THE EXPERIENCE

There is a combination of factors to consider when evaluating the user's experience. The first two factors include 1) how fast can a user who has never seen your Web site learn it? and 2) how quickly they can complete a task? I recently came across a great example of an easy to use Web site. Visiting [www.emerils.com](http://www.emerils.com) during the holidays, it was easy to come to the site and quickly complete a task (see above). If you go to the site looking for recipe information, you can click on food guide. Or if you are looking for a gift, simply click gift guide. If you have selected gift guide, you can then select products based on user types, such as For the CEO, For the Junior Chef, For the Emeril Fan, For the Family, etc. You can quickly and easily find information and complete a task within minutes.

Another factor is whether a user can remember how they found information and can they remember how to use the site the next time they visit it? And then, of course, how much do your users "like" your Web site?

While there are a great deal of considerations when designing your Web site, here are a few tips and techniques that you can use today that resonate well with most users:

1. Include a one-sentence tagline (summarize what your organization does)
2. Group all information about your organization in one distinct area ("About")
3. Emphasize the site's high-priority tasks (for an example, visit [www.ieee.org](http://www.ieee.org) and check out "what do you want to do")
4. Include a search box at the top right hand side of each page
5. Show examples of content that is posted behind the member's only area
6. Begin link names with the most important action words

(Join, Register, Buy, etc.)

7. Use meaningful graphics and simple fonts
8. Use consistent treatment of your logo, tagline and overall branding
9. Ensure you have persistent navigation and a site map, and consider "breadcrumbs," which display all visited pages leading from the home page to the currently viewed page (For example, Home >> About Us >> Board)
10. Make sure you ask your users and test, test, test

"The bar gets higher and higher for member-driven design and usability. In a world of "mash ups" and RSS feeds, organizations need to carefully ensure that the core elements of an association's unique content are integrated with its brand," says Don Dea, founder of Fusion Productions. At the end of the day, users and members want content that will help them do their jobs better or give them the information that is useful, timely and in the right context. This requires not only superior information architecture, but integrated content strategies, taxonomies, search and branding."

Following are the steps to defining usability as outlined by the Usability Professionals Association (located at [http://www.usabilityprofessionals.org/upa\\_publications/ux\\_poster.html](http://www.usabilityprofessionals.org/upa_publications/ux_poster.html))

### ANALYSIS PHASE

- Meet with key stakeholders to set vision
- Include usability tasks in the project plan
- Assemble a multidisciplinary team to ensure complete expertise
- Develop usability goals and objectives
- Conduct field studies
- Look at competitive products
- Create user profiles
- Develop a task analysis
- Document user scenarios
- Document user performance requirements

### DESIGN PHASE

- Begin to brain storm design concepts and metaphors
- Develop screen flow and navigation model

According to TheCounter.com, more than 80 percent of Internet users are using Internet Explorer version 6 and higher.

- Do walkthroughs of design concepts
- Begin design with paper and pencil
- Create low-fidelity prototypes
- Conduct usability testing on low-fidelity prototypes
- Create high-fidelity detailed design
- Do usability testing again
- Document standards and guidelines
- Create a design specification

#### IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

- Complete ongoing simple and quick evaluations with a small set of evaluators
- Work closely with delivery team as design is implemented
- Conduct usability testing as soon as possible

#### DEPLOYMENT PHASE

- Use surveys to get user feedback
- Conduct field studies to get info about actual use
- Check objectives using usability testing

#### FORRESTER RESEARCH NOTES THE FOLLOWING 10 ESTABLISHED AND EMERGING USER EXPERIENCE BEST PRACTICES:

##### *Best Practices For Evaluating Your Site And Determining Users' Needs*


- No. 10:** Flex your Web analytics package
- No. 9:** Conduct an expert review of your site
- No. 8:** Reach out to real users

##### *Best Practices For Redesigning Your Site*

- No. 7:** Focus on fixing usability problems with known solutions
- No. 6:** Adopt proven design methodologies and tools
- No. 5:** Look to other industries for innovation
- No. 4:** Ensure innovations are useful and usable

##### *Best Practices For Ensuring That Your Site Supports Your Business*

- No. 3:** Bolster your company's brand
- No. 2:** Measure site performance against business metrics
- No. 1:** Design with other channels in mind

Spending the time and money to conduct usability review and testing will save you time and money in the long run. A good user experience will drive loyalty and trust. And user satisfaction will support member retention and increased online profits. 

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