USABILITY BASICS

Usability is often overlooked in web design and it is normally missed because your web developer is so busy trying to fulfil your specifications for the site that there is little opportunity for the developer to work on the requirements of the user. If you are in the process of building a new site or redeveloping an existing site, please do your users a favour and look at the website from their point of view.

SPEED

The first issue that is important to the user is speed. Imagine that you have used a search engine to find a site that has information on Australian holidays, you click on a link that sounds exactly like the holiday you're looking for. Nothing happens, then slowly line by line a picture (very beautiful) begins to appear on the page; it's been 30 seconds and we're still only half way through seeing the first picture. Are you likely to stay? No is the correct answer, most users will click on the back button and find a site that is going to deliver on the promise of the site description.

Splash pages or Flash introduction pages do not add any value to the user. They may amuse them but they do not usually improve the user's experience of a website. Unless you have a very good reason to include this sort of feature and it increases the user's understanding of what you wish to convey, leave it out. They only serve to separate your site and the user by another click.

Make sure that your images are optimised for the web. So many pictures are much bigger than they need to be. I'm not talking dimensions here I'm talking file size. According to Jacob Nielsen an image file should be no more than 3KB. Mr Nielsen goes even further and says that **"speed must be the overriding design criterion".**

GIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT – WHERE THEY CAN SEE IT

Your home page needs to satisfy a number of user requirements. To do a good job of this you really should be asking your customers and users exactly what it is that they need your site to deliver. Unfortunately most people feel that this is a step that they can skip and this is their first mistake. If you have not got time to ask your users, or if your site is already online you can answer this list of questions to see if you are in the ballpark.

- Does your home page make it obvious what products and/or services you provide?
- Can users ascertain what sort of information they should be able to get from your site?
- Can users see all of the navigation features?
- Can users access your contact details?
- Does the user have to scroll? A little scrolling up and down is OK but should be avoided on the home page if possible. People do not like to scroll horizontally so don't do it.
- If your site is large do you have a search facility?
- Are the hyperlinks easy to identify and do the descriptions make sense?

BE THERE FOR YOUR USERS

Assurance is an issue that you should address with your user as soon as possible. People like to know who they are dealing with and there is a lot to be said for putting your ABN and other contact details on all of your pages. Other things that provide assurances to customers are privacy policies, terms and conditions, and a returns policy if you are selling something. You should also provide your users with an indication of when you will be able to respond to their query or order.

Nothing creates scepticism and mistrust faster than a site with no contact details. Sadly this is very common, especially in medium sized companies that provide support features via the web. A "Contact Us" page with just a form and no visible email address is like hiding from your users, so don't do it. They will feel that they have been had. I know of one such website that had one email address hidden away amongst 100 or so pages and invariably when anyone sent an email to that address it was always abusive.

PROVIDING VALUE

People will only use your website if you give them value. Often sites try to get users to provide their email address in exchange for a promise of something useful that they will deliver in a newsletter. Not many users will take up the offer unless they feel that they have already got some value from your site and that your newsletter is going to save them the bother of remembering to go back to your site regularly. Users are always looking for something that is going to advantage them. Win their trust on this front and you will often win their email address too.

WRITING FOR YOUR WEBSITE

Website copy is not like copy for your brochure; it is scanned rather than read and it is often read in grabs and in no particular order. Make sure that your copy fits this style of use.

Break up your text with bullet points, numbered lists, bolding and hyperlinks. Rather than present all of the information on a topic on a single flat page, use two or three pages that take the user into more detailed information.

USER TESTING

Usability is all about the user so don't leave them out. No matter how small your budget you need to spend some of your resources in this area. If you are yet to build the site ask your customers what questions they would expect your site to answer for them.

When your site is complete get at least a handful of your customers to give you honest feedback on the site and make a to-do-list from that feedback.