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Web “Usability” is a Key Factor in Whether Your Site is Profitable...or Not

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Web site usability *rules*—and without following industry-standard usability guidelines, your site might be sunk before it even goes live on the Internet. Why? Because the fact is, if your site’s not user-friendly—if your viewers can’t find what they’re looking for—there’s no point in having it.

Your Web site is as important to your business as your storefront, your best sales representative(s), the quality and reputation of your products and your brand.

Consider this for a moment. If you own a retail shop, you work hard to make sure it’s attractive, with clearly marked prices and several displays that help the shopper put your products together. Your friendly staff answers questions and is always available to assist with a quick, smooth checkout. Finally, you thank the customer and offer a savings coupon toward a return visit. It all makes for a very pleasant customer experience. This means they’ll likely return to buy more, and they’ll tell all their friends.

This is essentially what Web site usability means. It’s the delightful experience a customer has when they go on your site...so they’ll continue to buy from you and tell others.

A great Web site design contains the following usability considerations:

- A simple, clean design that focuses on customer needs versus overblown designs, overly wordy text or overbearing visual gimmicks
- Easy navigation or access to the main features, without being too busy or confusing
- Detailed information (other pages or links) within just one or two clicks; any more can be frustrating for the customer
- Appropriate and helpful graphics that balance with descriptive text
- A logical information hierarchy, with menus that guide customers to what they need

The book *Homepage Usability*, the Web industry’s usability “bible,” written by gurus Jakob Nielsen and Marie Tahir, is a wonderful resource that includes 113 usability guidelines. Here, we offer our own version with **10 essential requirements**.

1. Your site’s home page loads instantly (within 10 seconds).
2. Your home page clearly identifies who you are and reflects your company’s brand: logo in the left corner, include a tagline, etc.
3. Your primary navigation runs across the top of the page or down the left-hand side—NEVER on the right.

4. Prospects and customers immediately see what your business does for them...in a way that's different from/better than your competition.
5. Your home page is well organized, with a clear starting point and navigation/structure that prospects and customers can easily follow; it includes expected standard sections such as About Us, Contact Us, Help, and FAQs.
6. The most critical elements of your page appear "above the fold," (the area visitors see on their screen first when they land on your site).
7. Your site is clean and easy to read, using subheads, bullets, photos, captions, charts, etc. for quick scanning.
8. Your content is crisp and streamlined; no long paragraphs or redundant messages.
9. Your site provides detailed product or service information with just one to three clicks from the home page.
10. Your layout is focused on readership and selling messages, not fancy design (your color scheme is easy to read, with dark text against a white—or light—background).

These are just some of the ways you can boost your success on the Internet.

To learn more, you'll want to check out the ContentClear™ Marketing Method for Web Site Optimization, a clear, methodical 7-step approach to increasing Web conversions and sales.

Pam Foster, senior copywriter and online content consultant, is the founder of the ContentClear™ Marketing Method for Web Site Optimization (www.contentclear.com). Her diverse 28-year marketing communications background includes writing and consulting for many types of industries promoting B2C and B2B products and services. She has 13 years of experience in Web content writing and strategy, SEO, and information architecture, as well as direct mail – all for clients such as L.L. Bean, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Maine, the American Cancer Society, Harper College, AWAI, Downeast Energy and many others.

Pam is co-author of 9 Easy Steps to Planning a Profitable Web Site and several other books under the Internet Jungle Guide brand (www.internetjungleguide.com). She has won 100+ marketing awards including New England DMA (Direct Marketing Association), Web Marketing Association, Telly, and Catalog Age. She is an AWAI Copywriters Wall-of-Fame honoree. Pam works mainly with larger corporate clients, helping them optimize their Web sites to boost conversions and sales. She also offers personal coaching services to copywriters looking to elevate their Web content and client service skills and learn her 7-step Web site optimization method. You can contact Pam at pam@contentclear.com.

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