

Is your website working for you?

In the fast paced world of Internet surfing, people want to find the information they're looking for as quickly as possible. That's why the best sites focus on content and usability—not flashy graphics.

by Norman R. Ball, PhD

Remember when websites were cool? When just having one was an achievement? When one of your kids said: "Look at the website I made!"—or when you said the same thing to your parents? Things change fast on Internet time. Now a website is just another piece of equipment. Like all equipment, it must be good, not just workable. But what makes a good website?

Getting started

Business people now expect, and need, online information 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But in the rush to keep up, some rush in the wrong direction.

According to *Adobe Seminars: Web Page Design* "creating the right kind of website is 10 per cent software and programming, and 90 per cent knowing your objectives and executing from a well-considered plan." That 90-10 rule is crucially important and routinely violated. This isn't surprising. I think it's because people tend to overestimate the importance of what they are good at. If they are good at using technology to solve problems, they tend to overestimate the importance of technology in achieving their goals. And who is creating most websites today? Technology enthusiasts who like spending time on the web. And who is using websites more and more? People who need information so they can get on with what they really want to be doing.

Common design mistakes

Many readers are familiar with Jakob Nielsen's pioneering textbook *Usability Engineering*. Many in the computer busi-

ness regard his most recent book *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity* as a bible. Even greater numbers know him through his Alertbox columns on www.useit.com, the website for the NielsenNorman Group.

Nielsen has written a wonderful series of "alertboxes" on web design and writing for the web. In the "Top Ten Mistakes of Web Management," he identifies "Not Knowing Why" as number one. When I mentioned this to my students, they laughed—because they knew exactly what he meant. Many had stories to tell of being asked to create a website as part of a work project, without anyone ever telling them what the site was supposed to achieve, who it was supposed to attract and where it fit into the company's business plans. Of course, when the person designing the website hasn't the faintest idea of what he or she is supposed to do, the effect on the website user is predictable.

Nielsen suggests that organizations start designing their websites by finding out ways in which they can provide true value to users on their sites. In other words, give users benefits from spending time on your site. I am sure you have given up on some websites out of sheer frustration: They were confusing, incomplete, wordy, fussy, filled with links that went nowhere, or full of graphics that took forever to download but didn't add value.

What happens when a user gives up in frustration? What is lost? A sale? A contract? A potential star employee who decided not to apply for the job she saw listed in the newspaper? Every time a company says they are frustrated with the poor calibre of their job applicants, I look at their website. Today, bright young professionals wouldn't dream of going to a

job interview without looking at the company's website first. They know that a boring or disorganized website could mean a boring or disorganized company, and that a website designed around a company's organization chart might not be a particularly flexible or creative place to work.

These are the kinds of mistakes that Nielsen describes. He also points out that the web is not the place for recycling previously printed material. The web is a new medium that requires materials written specifically for it. And that means a new approach to writing.

Better writing needed

Nielsen, an engineer, made a surprising confession in his "Alertbox" column on the Top Ten Mistakes. As he put it, web design and development involves three levels:

- ◆ web management;
- ◆ interaction design (navigation support, homepage layout, templates, search functions, etc.);
- ◆ content design (the actual writing on the pages, as well as the design of any other media used to communicate content as opposed to site interaction). Just as in a hamburger, the middle layer is the most tasty and attracts the most attention. I have come to realize, however, that the outer two layers are more important in many ways: Users care only about content (in other words, no, the medium is not the message; *the message is the message*), and the usability of a website is more a function of how it is managed, than of how good its designers are.

Take that, Marshall McLuhan. The message is the message. After all these years, who would have thought that people really care most about content?

Well, they do. And Nielsen is now a strong advocate of the importance of language and writing in web design. In a landmark paper, "Concise, SCANNABLE, and Objective: How to Write for the Web," John Morkes and Jakob Nielsen (<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html>) revealed that on the web, users "do not actually read: Instead, they scan the text." This insight has enormous implications: You write and design for scanners, not readers. Think about it. When you are searching for information, you don't read every word in front of you. You scan for headings, you run your eye down bulleted lists, you glance at information that is highlighted, you graze the text, looking for clues to the content. You are grateful when the text is concise and comes to the point quickly. You are relieved when the opening lines of a piece of text spell out exactly what you

will find in the rest of the text.

To get the web right, we need to keep rethinking. In the early days of computing, GIGO meant "Garbage In Garbage Out." Now it means "Get In Get Out." GIGO is now a reminder that most people don't want to linger on the web. We know that people read material on screen much more slowly than they read from a printed page. Estimates range from 25 per cent to 30 per cent slower. Yet they want information faster. So website writers have to *write less and say more*. (If you want to see an actual example of how to do that, look at Nielsen's Alertbox column called "How Users Read on the Web" at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9710a.html>).

Learning from what works

Nielsen offers some surprising advice: "Do the same as everybody else."

This seems to fly in the face of all that we've heard about uniqueness, originality and standing out from the crowd. But, if the message really is the message, then

people want websites that contain useful content, rather than websites that try desperately to be different. And is different really all that valuable? Many websites try to stand out with music or loud colours or catchy graphics that jump around or wave in the breeze, but, in many cases, I would hardly call this adding value.

Nielsen also points out that once web users get the hang of using certain popular, well-known websites, they appreciate it when other websites work in the same way, and they don't have to relearn how to navigate with each new website they visit. This is why airports use the same international symbols for washrooms, restaurants, elevators, baggage handling and transportation. International standardized symbols have become familiar to travellers, so they can arrive jetlagged at an unfamiliar airport and still find the information they need. ◆

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