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SME Myths: If We Put Up a Website Customers Will Come To Us – Why Usability Is Important

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Abstract

Many businesses use their Websites primarily as an alternative marketing strategy. How a business's image, via a Website, is presented to potential customers is therefore important. There are many factors that will influence the effectiveness of a Website, two critical factors are how easily users are able to navigate and how easy the site is to use. The research reported here examined these two factors on users' responses to small and medium-sized business Websites. The research found that the quality of navigation and how easy a site is to use does have an impact, how much information is read, the importance of the graphical components, a user's emotional response to a Website, users' frustration and the user's intention to return to that Website. The research established the statistically significant elements that contribute to navigation and ease-of-use, and describes the design and successful application of a usability evaluation instrument.

1. Introduction

The implementation of a Website as part of a strategy to promote a business has been readily adopted by large as well as small businesses (Poon and Swatman 1999; Wang, et al. 2000). Among the reasons why many small business owners decide to develop a Website is the apparent low cost of development and the concern that if they don't, the business will be left behind. Keeping a user in a Website is important, as a high level of interactivity means users are exploring more leading to possible future visits and purchases (Geissler 2001). A key challenge therefore for Website designers is ensuring that Websites can be easily navigated and are easy to use to ensure they are effective from the business customers' perspective. This paper describes the development of a usability evaluation instrument and its application in evaluating Australian small and medium-sized business' (SMEs) websites. The instrument was used to explore a number of Website design elements from the users' perspective. Two of the elements explored were navigation and ease-of-use. This paper reports on the results relating to navigation and ease-of-use. The questions the research sought to answer were:

- What are the elements that contribute to effective navigation and ease-of-use?
- What impact does poor navigation and ease-of-use have on the users' overall experience of the site?
- To what extent does the quality of navigation and ease-of-use impact on a user's preparedness to return to a site?

2. Website Design, Navigation and Ease-Of-Use

Recent Australian research found, that over 65% of people between the age of 14 and 54 regularly used the Internet and 57% of Internet users look to the Internet for information (NOIE 2003). Further, 34% of small and 84% of medium businesses have a website, 43% of SMEs use it to promote their business and 32% use it to take orders (NOIE 2003). For this research a small business is defined as having less than 20 employees and medium business have between 20 -199 employees (Yellow Pages Report 2003). Given such significant Internet activity amongst consumers and the high level of Internet use amongst SMEs, it is timely to examine Website design and usability in this context, specifically aspects relating to navigation and ease-of-use.

The effectiveness of Websites depends on the designer's understanding of design, usability and the intended audience (Geissler 2001). Failure to understand what constitutes an effective Website will result in dissatisfaction from both the business and users' perspective. Navigation and ease-of-use are closely related. Aldawani's (2002) study relating to transactional Websites established ease-of-use had four dimensions of which "ease of navigation, ease of gathering information" (Aladwani 2002, pp233) were two.

Many SMEs have moved quickly to establish a Website with little understanding of what they are trying to achieve (Fisher et al 2000) with most using their Website primarily for promoting the business (Yellow Pages Report 2003). Thelwell (2000) argues there are particular problems with small business Websites, one of those problems is design. The literature describes the impact design has including:

- The higher users rate the ease-of-use of a Website, the greater the credibility of the Website and the business in the users' eyes (Roy, et al. 2001).
- Users will be more likely to make a transaction if the design, including navigation is effective (Abels, et al. 1998).

- The usability of a Website has an impact on how satisfied a user is in their browsing and search for information and the more information will be distributed (Silker and Gurak 1996; Fu and Salvendy 2002).
- Users’ reactions to a Website had a direct impact on whether they were prepared to purchase goods from that site (White and Manning 1998).
- Users will make more use of the site and more information will be distributed, if it is easily navigated and is well organised (Ceaparu 2003; Hargittai 2003).
- Users spend more time at the site (Zhang, et al. 2000).
- Users will discontinue use of a site if it becomes difficult to navigate, is too complex or if too many clicks are needed to reach the required information (Shim et al 2002).

There are a number of elements (graphics and design features) described in the literature which assist with improving navigation and impact on ease-of-use, Table 1 details these.

Table 1: Key elements in effective navigation design and ease-of-use

Navigation and ease-of-use elements	Supporting literature
Design consistency in both navigation elements and information presentation.	Thelwall 2000; Preece, et al. 2000
Providing landmarks, signposts such as side bars, graphics, and their quality.	Shneiderman 1998; Katz and Byrne 2003
Clarity of navigation aids.	Preece, et al. 2002
Ease of navigation, navigation complexity.	Silker and Gurak 1996; Preece, et al. 2002
Design of the text and organisation of information content.	Nielsen 1999; Zhang, et al. 2000; Shneiderman and Plaisant 2005; Sutcliffe 2002
Accessibility of information that is easy to read, quantity and quality of information.	Ceaparu 2003; Becker and Mottay 2001
Ease of locating information	Ceaparu 2003; Hargittai 2003; Jenkins, et al. 2003; Fu and Salvendy 2002;

The elements identified in Table 1 were used to investigate the navigational and ease-of-use aspects of SME Websites.

3. Research Design

The motivation for developing a usability evaluation instrument to assess small business Websites came from our observation that most small businesses have little understanding of website design and usability. Research the authors undertook earlier established that most SME owners have little idea of what they want to do with their website and do not participate actively in the design. Not surprisingly, few if any of the business owners have had their websites evaluated or tested with users in any way (Fisher et al. 2000).

3.1 Development of the Usability Evaluation Instrument

There is significant literature describing research that has looked at usually one or two elements of website design however few have sought to look at the interaction between the elements. Our usability evaluation instrument developed and described in this paper explored elements relating to the design of information, ease-of-use including navigation and the appearance and graphical/visual presentation of the website.

The usability instrument was designed, pilot tested, refined and tested again. The instrument was designed to be completed in less than 20 minutes, most evaluators were able to complete their evaluation in under 15 minutes. The instrument used a combination of question types allowing both quantitative and qualitative data to be collected.

Evaluators were asked to respond to 14 Likert scale type statements and ten questions requiring a Yes/No response. Where questions and statements were presented requiring a response on a five-point scale, 1 was rated the lowest score and 5 the highest. Sixteen questions required a free text response. Results from the qualitative data collected however are not discussed in this paper. Table 2, describes the different research approaches reported in the literature that also investigated websites from a user's perspective.

Table 2: Previous research investigating website design

Researcher(s)	Questions/method	Numbers
Aladwani (2002)	Investigated ease-of-use and usefulness using a five point Likert type scale Strongly disagree to Strongly agree.	387 students
Nel et al. (1999)	Used a 1-5 scale to assess a number of variables to measure flow through a website.	36 relatively inexperienced web users
Sutcliffe (2002)	Investigated website attractiveness and usability. Used a 1-5 scale to assess a number of website elements.	9 undergraduate students
Zhang et al. (2000)	Investigated presentation, navigation and quality of Fortune 500 companies' home pages. Used a scale of 1-7 to assess these elements.	40 students
White and Manning (1998)	Research explored intention to buy from food and drink sites.	163 web users

A theoretical model describing the elements and general principles relating to effective Website navigation design and ease-of-use was developed (Table 1). Table 3 contains the list of questions and statements used to investigate the aspects of navigation and ease-of-use. The questions and statements were similar to other tests used and described in the literature (Table 2). It should be noted that other aspects of Website design were explored through this research but are not discussed in this paper.

Table 3: Questions and statements used to explore the different navigation elements of Websites

Navigational and ease-of-use elements	Questions/statements used to explore that element
Design consistency in both navigational elements and information presentation	I found the different parts of the interface such as the icons to be consistent. *
Provision of landmarks and signposts such as side bars, graphics.	I found the graphics on the site appealing or attractive. * It was easy to navigate through the site.* The language used was easy to understand. *
Clarity of navigation aids.	Generally the text was displayed in a way that was easy to read. * It was easy to navigate through the site. *

Ease of navigation, navigation complexity	It was easy to navigate through the site. * Were you at any stage frustrated using the site? (Yes/ No) The site was easy to use. *
Design of the text and organisation of information content assists or hinders navigation	Sometimes there was too much information on the screen. The size of the text was easy to read. * The language used was easy to understand. * How easy was it to find the information you required to complete the task? (Scale: Very difficult 1 to Very easy 5)
General response to the Website	Overall how would you describe your experience using this site? (Scale: Not engaged 1 to Very engaged 5) How much of the information on the site did you actually read? (Scale: None 1 to All 5)
* Scale used was: Strongly disagree 1 to Strongly agree 5	

The full set of questions and statements used have not been provided in the paper however a copy will be provided on request. Appendix A lists the Websites used and the tasks set.

3.2 Application of the Usability Evaluation Instrument

A heuristic approach to the usability evaluation was taken. Nielsen is credited with developing the heuristic evaluation technique (Preece, et al. 2002). The technique Nielsen developed is one in “which experts, guided by a set of usability principles known as heuristics, evaluate whether user interface elements, such as dialog boxes, menus, navigation structure, online help, etc., conform to the principles.” (Preece et al. 2002, pp408). In our case the usability tests involved students who were studying Human Computer Interaction, the curriculum included the design and conduct of a usability test. The questions the evaluators were asked guided their heuristic evaluation of the interface. This is consistent with the work of others for example Nielsen and Molich (1990). Dumas and Redish (1994) examined a number of evaluation techniques and concluded that “usability testing uncovers more usability problems than other evaluation methods.” (Dumas and Redish 1994).

The evaluators were provided with a scenario and asked to undertake a task(s) for a particular site then complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire explored the evaluator’s experience and views of that site, they then moved onto the tasks for the next site. Each site was explored by at least six users through to a maximum of 43 users. A low number of evaluators is acceptable as it is in line with usability testing where it is suggested that between five and eight users will generate useful results (Nielsen and Molich, 1990).

Twenty five Websites were randomly selected belonging to SMEs, 20 in the capital city Melbourne and five in regional Victoria. All the Websites were small in size, 19 sites had less than 30 pages. This allowed users to explore as much of the site as possible in a relatively short time. All but one of the businesses had a physical site as well as the Website. The businesses varied in their type however all were involved in leisure activities or retail. The first three full tests looked at the same sites where possible, new sites were introduced where Websites were no longer available. The final test looked at ten completely new sites.

The total number of evaluators was 200, 55.1% male and 45.9% female. The evaluators were all tertiary students of different age groups however most were under the age of 25 (90%+). As would be expected they were experienced in using the Internet with only 7% described themselves as having limited experience. Although the tests were conducted at different times the computer equipment and the environment for all groups was very similar. The tests resulted in 572 usable Website evaluations. Table 4 provides the testing details.

Table 4: Usability test details

	Number of users	Total number of sites	Number of sites explored by each user
Pilot	14	8	4
Full test 1	26	8	3
Full test 2	79	7	3
Full test 3	81	10	3
Total	200	25	

Each evaluator was given the same scenario and tasks to complete for that site. The questionnaire was the same for all sites. Sites were evenly allocated to male and female participants. The order in which sites were tested was organised so that no one site was evaluated exclusively either first or last. The tasks were selected based on the expectations of what could be accomplished through the Websites. The tasks were designed to be gender neutral, for example, the task for the jewellery site was to investigate purchasing a watch, rather than an item of jewellery. Initially the evaluators were asked to evaluate four sites however, it was found after the first test that when evaluators investigated four sites by the fourth site they had lost interest and did not comment in as much detail on the last site.

4. Data Analysis and Research Results

The quantitative results were analysed using SPSS. A Factor Analysis was used to establish if the variables that were identified as contributing to navigation were in fact related. Cross tabulations were performed. A cross tabulation is used to demonstrate “the presence or absence of a relationship” (Bryman and Cramer 1992, 153). In this case the cross tabulations were used to establish the extent to which elements identified in Table 1, had an impact on the effectiveness of the navigation and the ease-of-use. A Chi-squared test was applied to determine the significance of the results.

4.1 Reliability Analysis

The 5 point scale statements listed in Table 4 were tested for reliability using Cronbach’s alpha. The value of 0.807 exceeds the recommended minimum value of 0.7 for Cronbach’s alpha indicating a high level of reliability for the retained questions.

4.2 Factor Analysis

A factor analysis on six of the key elements indicated that 76.5% of the variance could be explained by three components. Tables 5 and 6 present the results.

Table 5: Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Text size appropriate	1.000	.782
Design appeal	1.000	.708
Text display appropriate	1.000	.807
Navigation easy	1.000	.856
Site easy to use	1.000	.872
Graphics good	1.000	.779
Interface consistent	1.000	.506

Table 6: Rotated Component Matrix(a)

	Component		
	1	2	3
Site easy to use	.853		
Navigation easy	.827		
All information provided	.669		
Graphics good		.873	
Design is appealing		.773	
Interface consistent		.630	
Text size appropriate			.841
Text display appropriate			.832

Principle component analysis using Varimax Rotation.

Table 6 indicates Factor 1 is associated with usability (ease-of-use/navigation) and confirms Aldawani’s (2002) findings that ease in finding information is related to ease-of-use. Factor 2 is associated with presentation of the interface and Factor 3 presentation of information. The amount of information on the screen and the language used are not related to the two extracted factors including navigation and these were removed.

4.3 Cross Tabulations

The following are the results of the statistically highly significant cross tabulations ($p < 0.001$). It should be noted that the results are organised according to the weakness or strength of Pearson’s correlation co-efficient (r). It is suggested that the larger the data set, that is over 500, the lower r needs to be to be considered significant and can be as low as 0.115 (Bryman & Cramer 1992, p.172). The purpose of the cross tabulations was to establish the extent to which the factors identified relating to navigation and ease-of-use, impacted on other elements.

The statements ‘It was easy to navigate through the site’ and ‘The site was easy to use’ were cross tabulated with the questions and statements presented in Table 2. The statistically significant results and those which were also correlated are described below.

- If evaluators found all the information they needed to complete the task they rated those Websites easier to navigate ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.306$) and easy to use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.338$).
- There was a strong correlation between how appealing the evaluators rated the overall design of a Website and how easy it was to navigate ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.339$) and how easy it was to use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.293$).

- Consistency in the design of the interface was, not surprisingly, important in navigating the Website ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.259$) and contributed to ease-of-use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.306$).
- Websites where the text was displayed effectively the evaluators found were easier to navigate ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.343$) and easier to use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.281$).
- How easy the language used was to understand was strongly correlated with how easy the site was to navigate ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.267$) and its ease-of-use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.297$).
- Text size was also important. Where the evaluators regarded the text size as appropriate they also found sites easier to navigate ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.220$) and easier to use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.169$).
- Graphics influenced navigation and ease-of-use. Where the graphics were rated as appealing evaluators were more likely to find the navigation easy ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.206$) and the site generally easy to use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.181$).
- When a Website is easy to navigate ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.196$) and easy to use ($p < 0.000$, $r = 0.141$) evaluators read more of the information from the Website.

In addition the two statements relating to navigation and ease-of-use were also cross tabulated against the questions ‘Overall how would you describe your experience using this site?’ ‘Were you at any stage frustrated using the site?’ and ‘Were you able to complete the task?’ It is recommended that a Contingency-table coefficient analysis is conducted where the data being compared were nominal and interval (Bryman & Cramer 1992). This was done with the data relating to frustration and task completion. The results indicate that there was a strong correlation between the level of frustration and interest in the site depending on the effectiveness of the navigation and how easy the site was to use. In addition the evaluators who did not complete the task (30% of users were not able to complete the task) rated those Websites as not easy to navigate (0.001) and not easy to use (0.000).

5. Discussion

Katz and Byrne (2003) suggest navigation is a “fairly trivial process” on small sites with the implication that the quality of the navigation will not have a significant impact on the overall effectiveness of the Website. All sites selected were small. Our research however found that even on small Websites the quality of the navigational elements and how easy the site is to use has an impact on task completion.

The research demonstrated that the usability evaluation instrument developed does measure the elements we set out to measure. The items identified as relating to navigation and ease-of-use do in fact contribute to both of these. The usability evaluation instrument has also been shown to be effective in evaluating small business Websites and has provided a useful tool for examining and comparing different design elements.

The data analysis indicates that the factors identified in Table 1 and the questions / statements that explored those elements described in Table 2 are the elements that can be regarded as contributing to effective navigation. Figure 1 describes the different design elements that were confirmed as contributing to navigation and ease-of-use (see Table 6).

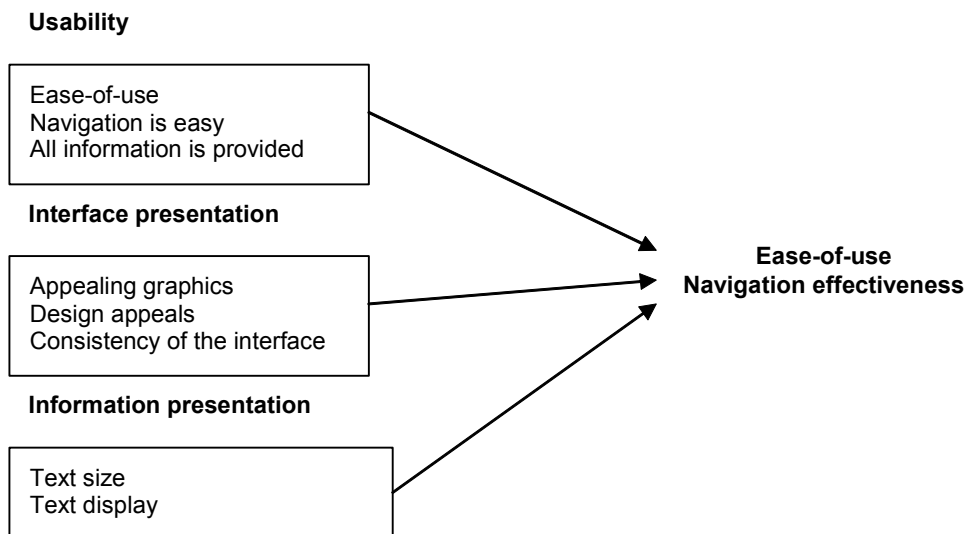


Figure 1: Elements contributing to effective navigation and ease-of-use

For small business owners the message is clear greater attention needs to be paid to Website design if users are to interact successfully with a site and information is to be successfully distributed. Designers need to ensure that the information presented is clear and well organised. The interface must be consistent, the quality of the graphics must be considered because graphics are an important contributor to effective navigation and ease-of-use.

The quality of the navigation and how easy a site is to use does impact on how interested users are in a Website and therefore their likelihood to return to that site. Users are likely to be less interested in a website if it is difficult to navigate or difficult to use. A user's level of frustration is also strongly correlated with both elements.

For many small businesses the distribution of information via their Website is a key reason for establishing a site (Yellow Pages 2003). Users were more likely to read more information from a site if the Website was easy to navigation and easy to use. The ability to find information from a Website also strongly influences how easy a user considers a Website is to use and to navigate.

The presentation of information is also important, this includes the size of the text, the style of the language used and generally how the text is displayed. All these have an impact on whether the users find a website easy to navigate and easy to use.

6. Conclusion

Dholakia and Rego (1998) argue that “the Web represents a relatively easy and extremely inexpensive way to advertise, lowering the barriers to entry for small businesses”, (p. 724). Earlier research has established that the content and the design of a web page have a direct impact on a customer's view of a business that is, how favourably a user views a vendor (Roy, et al. 2001) Research by Geissler (2001) found that navigation was critical for facilitating interactivity with a Website and concluded that “Website design directly influences the customer conversion process” (p. 497). None of this research data however has identified a specific set of elements that contribute to navigation and ease-of-use. This research sought to and was able to identify and confirm those elements critical to navigation and ease-of-use. For small business owners the message is clear;

unless the site is easy to navigate and easy to use users are unlikely to return to the site and may not view the business in as positive a light. This means designers of SME Websites must pay close attention to the identified elements and ensure usability testing is conducted.

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Appendix A

Site No	Scenario / Task
1. Historic mansion and reception centre	Investigate booking a birthday party.
2. Bicycle shop	Investigate purchasing a bike and repairs.
3. Florist	Investigate purchasing flowers.
4. Motel	Investigate booking a room.
5. Disabled aids	Buy a gift for a disabled child.
6. Jewellers	Investigate purchasing a watch.
7. Reception Centre	Investigate booking a birthday party.
8. Green groceries	Buy potatoes and apples.
9. Pharmacy	Investigate buying a present.
10. Leisure centre	How much does it cost to join, what facilities are available.
11. Electrical repair shop	Investigate repairing a video recorder.
12. Audio sales	Investigate buying a car stereo.
13. Food seller	Find out about having food delivered.
14. Bus company	Find out the best route and bus number to catch to a local school.
15. Alternative medicine and therapies	Find out more about kinesiology and other alternative therapies.
16. Private club	You are interested in events in May at the club, find out what is on and find out how to join.
17. Juke box hire	Investigate hiring a jukebox for your parents' 40 th wedding anniversary.
18. Gym and swimming pool	Investigate joining the local gym, and the classes offered.
19. Historic museum (regional Victoria)	Investigate a possible visit to the Museum. Find out about entry fees and opening times.
20 Book shop	You would like to purchase a book on Australian History. You do not want to spend more than \$35.
21 Accommodation regional Victoria	You have planned a weekend in Bendigo and want more information about accommodation.
22. Tour company (regional Victoria)	You plan a trip to the Grampians. Explore what the options are for tours, costs, etc
23. Hotel in Melbourne	You have friends coming to Melbourne. Find out the costs and availability of rooms. What are the facilities?
24. Skate board site	Find the closest skate board store for buying a skate board.
25. Site for the hire of Kayaks.	You are planning a holiday and want to go kayaking. Find out about what the options are, prices, availability.