

HOW CUSTOMER- FRIENDLY IS YOUR WEBSITE?

BY A. CHARLOTTE RILEY

Take a look at your website. A hard look. The question you need to be able to answer isn't "Do I think my site is pretty good?" but rather, "Do my clients and prospective customers think my site is great?" If you are designing a new site, or overhauling an existing one, customer satisfaction and a positive user experience should be at the very root of Web design and online content, because nothing says brand loyalty like a happy customer.



WHAT'S THE MOTIVATION?

Who are your clients and what do they want? It sounds so simple, but often companies can overlook this initial step in the rush to position their product or service as the best or to spout off about years of expertise. For the most part, customers do not care as much about you as you think they do.

Study your clients' preferences, attitudes, quirks, and behaviours. Use this information to drive your site structure and content development. What information does the prospect need to be comfortable making a purchase or going onto the next step in the sales conversion process? Organize your site around this one objective. For example, a software company might feature a free 30-day trial of their product on its homepage and product page to entice users, funnelling as many prospects as possible to the trial download page.

Too many times Web pages ask visitors to do too much: sign up for a newsletter, try a demo, go to the product page, "Buy now!", read this article, and on and on the list goes. Make the experience from homepage to conversion seamless by gearing the navigation around your prospects' needs.

WHAT DO I GET?

When it comes to content development, all copy should be written from a "What do I get?" customer vantage point. How does your company's site address the hopes, fears, and needs of your client base? What is the most remarkable aspect of your company that differentiates you from your competitors—and more importantly, how does your client benefit from your uniqueness?

Speak directly to your client. Go ahead, say "you" and "your". Use easy-to-spot headings to make it a cinch for site visitors to figure out what you do in three seconds. These headings should answer client questions or promote a product benefit.

LOST IN TECHNOLOGY

Site visitors want a couple of very basic requirements met: they want to find information easily, and they want to be able to "get in and get out" quickly.

The slick Flash intro—don't bother. How many times have you searched for that "Skip Intro" button? Designers love intros, but study after study shows that site visitors don't. They waste time and separate the visitor from the information they are looking for.

So, do not bog down your site visitor with a high bandwidth splash page. Instead, make sure they can access your professional-looking site immediately and that all images download quickly. Opt for simplicity over complexity and you will win every time.

BE TRUSTWORTHY

There are some sites that we instantly feel comfortable using. Why is that? They convey trust and credibility through design and content. How? Here are a few key things that help build trust:

- ✓ A consistent look and feel across the site, as well as between online and offline sales collaterals
- ✓ Up-to-date information
- ✓ Copywriting that is free from typos and grammatical mistakes
- ✓ A privacy policy, a terms of use policy, and an FAQ/help section
- ✓ A returns policy, if applicable
- ✓ An auto-responder that confirms contact enquiries or thanks customers for their order, and, even better, can be personalized to include the customer's name

TALK TO ME!

Can prospective clients figure out how to contact you in a matter of seconds? Why not integrate a toll-free number into your site's banner, making it easy for clients to pick up the phone and call your company without having to click through to the contact page.

On your contact page, provide multiple ways to get in touch—telephone, fax, e-mail, snail mail, etc. Be sure to post your office or store hours. If your site features a contact form, see to it that once submitted, visitors get a message telling them when they can expect to hear back from you.

PLEASE, WE HARDLY KNOW ONE ANOTHER...

Lead generation forms and requests for additional product or service details should be fast and easy. This means keep the required information fields to a minimum. Never make it mandatory for people to provide their address, title, gender, etc. just to get additional product info or a free giveaway. Start with the basics—like name and e-mail—and build the relationship before gathering additional customer intelligence.

Conversion specialists say that there is a 13% drop-off rate if the address is required and an additional 12% drop-off simply if the form looks like it will take too long to fill out.

As well, if you have an e-commerce site or any sort of online ordering form, it should be kept brief, to reduce cart abandonment rates. Instead of a long, scrolling order form, divide it up into a two-step (and two-page) process to make it 'feel' shorter.

Lastly, something to keep in mind is this: In the hyper-paced world of Internet, if your site isn't customer friendly, it is all too easy for prospects to go to your competitor's site, with just a click of the mouse. **E**

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