

Design Tip: Web Site Usability Checklist

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Search engine promotion is important: most visitors use a search engine to find your site. But once they arrive, they have to be able to actually use the site and understand the content. Otherwise, your site is a waste of their time.

Our usability checklist highlights five important components of a usable Web site. This month's Webmaster Tips issue also contains handy, annotated checklists that address other important areas:

February 2004 (Part 2)
Vol. 7, No. 4

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1. **Design a clear and simple navigation system.** According to Web usability expert, Jakob Nielsen, a good navigation system should answer three questions:
 1. Where am I?
 2. Where have I been?
 3. Where can I go?

Your site's navigation system will answer all three questions if you're careful to include these basic elements:

- **Keep it consistent.** The navigation system should be in the same place on every page and have the same format. Visitors will get confused and frustrated if links appear and disappear unpredictably. Consider using [Server Side Includes](#) for your main navigation system to make certain the navigation system stays consistent.
- **Use appropriate text inside links.** Don't make your visitors guess where a link is going to take them. Visitors should be able to anticipate a link's destination by reading the text in the link or on the navigation button. This isn't the time to be cute or obscure - visitors don't have the time or patience for it.

If there's any question about a link's destination, clarify the issue with a [TITLE attribute](#) that explains exactly where the link goes.
- **Use CSS to emphasize text links.** Some designers dislike underlined text links inside page content - although visitors expect to be able to click on underlined text. If you decide to remove this important visual navigation clue, [style your links with CSS](#) to replace underlining with another, consistent visual technique like a background color, different font, or text color that indicates a hyperlink.
- **Always include text links.** You can create some great looking menus using JavaScript or other scripting language, but never rely completely on a dynamic menu system. Some users may have problems using a mouse to navigate through the menu and others may be listening to the page using a screen reader. Every page should have basic text links that link to all major sections of the site.
- **Add a text-based site map.** Large or complex sites should always have a [text-based site map](#) in addition to text links. Every page should contain a text link to the site map. Lost visitors will use it to find their way, while search engines spiders will have reliable access to all your pages.
- **Include a home page link inside your main navigation system.** Visitors may enter your site via an internal page, but hopefully they'll want to head for the home page next.
- **Site logo links to home page.** Most sites include their logo somewhere at the top of every page - generally in the top, left-hand corner. Visitors expect this logo to be a [link to your site's home page](#). They'll often go there

before looking for the home link in the navigation system.

- **Include a site search box.** A robust [site search feature](#) helps visitors quickly locate the information they want. Make the search box prominent and be sure that it searches all of your site - and only your site. We've run across far too many Web sites that include a "Search the Web" search box on their home page. The result? Visitors hardly get to the site before the search function sends them to another site!

2. **Keep the content clear and simple.** You may attract visitors with an eye-catching design, but content is what keeps them at the site and encourages them to return. Content is also the best way to boost your site in search engine rankings.

Always keep search engines in mind when you write content, but remember that your ultimate audience is human visitors. Present your content with humans in mind.

- **Don't save the best for last.** Place your most important content high on the page. Think of a newspaper: the top story is always prominently displayed above the fold. Check your page display at in a number of different screen resolutions to make sure that your most important content is visible when the page loads.
- **Make page content easy to scan.** You'll spend hours - maybe days - writing your page content and it's really annoying to think that visitors may read less than half of it. Format your content so that it's easy to scan. Emphasize important points (or product characteristics) with a combination of header tags, bold type, color, or lists.
- **Avoid using text inside images whenever possible.** Text in images is invisible to search engine spiders and to visitors who may have images turned off in their browsers or who use assistive technologies like screen readers.
- **Add ALT and TITLE attributes to all images.** Each image should have a [descriptive ALT attribute](#) and [TITLE attribute](#) associated with it - particularly images that are also links to other pages. That way, they can quickly jump to the page they're interested in without having to wait for the entire page to load.
- **Contrast, contrast, contrast!** Be careful with [background images and colors](#) because they can obscure the text content on the page. Make sure you have a good reason to deviate from the successful dark text on a light background model. Visitors can't buy your products if they can't read the content.

3. **Support your brand.** A good brand creates or reinforces a user's impression of the site. When your site is strongly branded, that means that visitors will think of you first when they go shopping for your product or service.

Branding on a Web site takes time, effort, and close attention to page design and layout.

- **Keep colors and typefaces consistent.** Visitors should never click on an internal link in your site and wonder if they've left your Web site. [Choose your colors](#) and fonts carefully and use them consistently throughout the site.
- **Keep page layout consistent.** Use a [Web site template](#) to enforce a uniform page structure. Visitors should be able to predict the location of important page elements after visiting just one page in your site.
- **Custom error page.** Create a useful custom error page that helps visitors if they should click on a broken internal link or type a URL incorrectly. The [custom error page](#) should reflect the site's overall color, type, and layout structure as much as possible and provide useful links to help visitors find what they're looking for.
- **Create a good tagline and use it on every page.** A [good tagline](#) clearly and concisely explains your "value proposition" or what makes your site stand out from competing sites. It should be memorable and reinforce your brand in one quick phrase.

4. **Provide for visitor feedback.** Forms are critical to the success of ecommerce sites. Without forms, you can't have a shopping cart. But any site usually needs at least one form to allow for user feedback. A form helps you [hide from email](#)

[spiders](#) and also helps you control how user feedback is formatted and sent.

- **Keep feedback forms short and clearly note which information is required to successfully submit the form.** Take care to [design accessible forms](#) that all visitors can use.
 - **Remember your international users and don't require information they may not have - like area codes or ZIP codes.**
 - **Present complete contact information including your business phone number and postal address.** A street address is preferred, but you may want to use a PO box if yours is a home-based business. Visitors will probably prefer to contact you using email or a form, but they feel more comfortable with a site that allows other contact methods.
5. **Test the site on real users.** Remember that you're the designer so of course you effortlessly use the navigation system, love the content, and understand the value proposition. But now it's time to get user feedback - before your online users start sending it in.

[Usability testing](#) helps you replicate the experience of the average Web site user and correct problems before online visitors find them. It also gives you valuable answers to other questions:

- **Do visitors enjoy using the site?** If so, they'll stay longer and read more content.
- **Do they understand the purpose of the site?** If not, there's no compelling reason to return.
- **Is there any incentive to return after the first visit?** Your site should try to be the ultimate authority on the Web for your topic. A site with depth and breadth encourages visitors to bookmark it and refer friends interested in the same topic.
- **Can they recover from errors?** Usability testing is the best way to test how well your site search, site map, forms, and custom error pages function. They should all work together to guide a visitor through the site and help him get where he's going. Frustrated visitors aren't likely to return - ever.

Web usability means designing for your visitors instead of for yourself or your client. A site that [conforms to user expectations](#) makes visitors more comfortable and more apt to visit again and recommend the site to their friends. Good usability is critical to your site's success.