

It's mine, it's my 'precious'

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The world of the World Wide Web is always changing, and has been available for long enough that most of us have long ago set out on our online journey. In fact, many organisations have had a website for long enough that it has become "precious" to them, remained unchanged for too long, and so maybe, has become a little too "precious".

We all know that when done right, the Internet is a serious place to do business by providing your existing and future customers with access to the goods and services on offer. What is often forgotten, amongst all this information which we clamour to provide, is "Who are we providing it for?" and the equally important question "How are we providing it?" When I wrote the sentence "by providing your existing and future customers with acces..." I intentionally missed out some important descriptive words like 'quickly', 'easily', 'simply' and 'efficiently'. In reality, are we actually doing it well? Is it easy and straightforward for our customers to use? Have we even bothered to check? In our quest to get it all up there and make it happen don't forget that the smallest detail can have the profoundest effect on the outcome.

In his "Top Ten Web Design Mistakes of 2003" one of the Internets pioneering usability gurus, Jakob Nielsen recently pointed out some clear and often very common examples of how simple usability issues can seriously affect your website in terms of how well it is received and ultimately its success as a business asset.

Examples of the mistakes he listed in his top ten of 2003 are:

"Products Sorted Only by Brand": Many sites now list thousands of products, instead of a few dozen as in the early days, but all too often the means to filter these down to the few your users are interested in are too limited. In order to provide better usability Nielsen suggests that you need to look to your users by asking the question "What attributes do users value?" The answers will differ depending on the product, but user research can help.

"Overly Restrictive Form Entry" is another item in Nielsen's top ten, and one I experienced myself only today. Because I find it easier to visually check, I entered my credit card number with spaces between each of the groups of numbers. When I submitted the order, the process failed. Although it failed politely, it was not clear why. I persevered by trying a number of changes including removing the spaces from my credit card and hey presto my order completed. Had I not been the hardened e-purchaser that I am, (so I do a little eBay from time to time....), I almost certainly would have left at this point — no purchase made! However, even as experienced as I am, I was still left thinking, "What a pain! — Why did I have to go through all that?", particularly when I know the computer could have done it for me. So, when asking a user

to enter information, make it easy for them, make sure you put the burden on the computer and not the human, and let users enter data in the format they prefer.

Unfortunately, there aren't enough words available to me here to cover all of Nielsen's top ten, or come to that many of the other valuable examples I can think of and have experienced, but I hope these examples get the message across: Don't forget to canvas the opinion of your users!

Don't just rely on electronic means to get to this valuable information. While feedback forms are a must on any purposeful website they should not be the only way you get feedback from your users. Having seen much of the useless information that can come through this often anonymous process it's easier to see how valuable comment may be lost. You are also relying on the user "being bothered" or "having the time" for this kind of feedback process.

You can find out in half an hour from talking to human beings who use your website what a thousand feedback form responses may not provide. So, make sure that you allow time, resource and budget to interview some of your users both during the development phase of your web project and also regularly through it's growing life. This was brought home to me recently at an online trade show where I was used as a "usability guinea pig" during a talk on this very subject. In a nutshell, I was put through a scenario where I was asked to use a couple of online toyshops to buy a birthday present for my (soon to be) 2 year old son. The catch was that I was hooked up to a microphone and asked to be "brutally honest" about every aspect of the purchasing experience as I went through the process unguided. It was a real eye-opener to me how many things I commented on in this way which I normally just accept as passing annoying thoughts. When added together they made me realise that although many sites are capable of getting you from Arrival to Order, there are often simply far too many usability issues which add up to feeling "You can't get there from here", or "not easily anyway".

So, while your website should be "precious" to you, make sure that in trying to satisfy the targets and desires of your websites' stakeholders, (who are part of your ongoing website journey), you do not forget the purpose of your quest: to provide the relevant service to your customers. If you are not doing it well and don't commit the time and resource to focus on their actual real world experiences, then much of the value you set out to create, will be lost.