



# Website Design Guidelines

## Background

The following design guidelines originated in *HOMEPAGE USABILITY, 50 Websites Deconstructed*, Jacob Nielsen & Marie Tahir, New Riders Publishers, 2002. The guidelines are based on the following considerations:

- Multiple years of experience
- Usability testing and observing what works and what doesn't

One of the main findings in Jacob Nielsen's usability studies is that sites work best when they follow the conventions users know from other sites. The more the majority of sites do things a certain way, the more a specific site's usability will usually increase by complying with that convention. Consistency with other websites allows for a transfer of learning from those other sites and allows the users to focus their potentially brief attention on the unique content of the current site, as oppose to struggling with new innovative ways of representing 'standard' information. Numerous usability-testing sessions have confirmed that users bring with them many expectations that have been established by visits to all preceding sites.

These website design guidelines have been applied to NetGain Design's own website. We are advocates for usability, and as such, our own web site should score high against 'de facto' usability standards. We are proud of our 95% score.

We would be happy to conduct a similar usability assessment of your web site or web application. Please contact us at [Info@netgaindesign.com](mailto:Info@netgaindesign.com) for more information.

## Rating of Website

The guidelines are categorized by topic, and not all topics are applicable to all web sites. (Those not applicable have been tagged as 'NA'.) In scoring compliance to the guidelines, items that were not addressed by the web site received a '0', items that fully met the guideline received a '1', and items that were partially met received a '1/2'.

Of those items appropriate for the web site:

- A score of 80% or higher is very good. "Perfect" websites will follow around 90 to 95% of the usability guidelines that apply to that particular site.
- A score between 50% and 80% should motivate a redesign of a new homepage.
- A score below 50% requires a serious reassessment of the overall site and a possible revision in approach.

## NetGain Design's Website Assessment Against Guidelines

Guidelines	Current
<b>Communicating the Site's Purpose</b>	
1. Show the company name and/or logo in a reasonable size and noticeable location. Average is about 70 pixels width or height.	1
2. Include a tag line that explicitly summarizes what the site or company does.	1
3. Emphasize what your site does that's valuable from the user's point of view, as well as how you differ from key competitors.	1
4. Emphasize the highest priority tasks so that users have a clear starting point on the homepage.	1
5. Clearly designate one page per site as the official home page.	1
6. Don't use the word "website" to refer to anything but the totality of the company's web presence.	1
7. Design the homepage to be clearly different from all other pages on the site.	1
<b>Communicating Information About Your Company</b>	
8. Group corporate information, such as About Us, Investor Relations, Press Room, Employment and other information about the company, in one distinct area.	1
9. Include a link to an "About Us" section	1
10. If you want to get press coverage include a "Press Room" or "News Room" link.	NA
11. Don't separate the web presence from the rest of the company - present a unified face to the customer.	1
12. Include a "Contact Us" link.	1
13. If you provide a "feedback" mechanism, specify the purpose of the feedback and who will read it.	1
14. Don't include internal company info that should go on the intranet.	1
15. If you site gathers any customer information include a "Privacy Policy" link	1
16. Explain how the website makes money if it's not self-evident.	1

<b>Content Writing</b>	
17. Use customer-focused language. Label sections and categories according to the value they hold for the customer, not according to what they do for your company. Use the words the customers use.	1
18. Avoid redundant content. Repeating identical items, such as categories or links, on the homepage in order to emphasize their importance actually reduces their impact. On the other hand, redundant content can help people if you repeat items that belong in multiple categories or you include links to the same page but offer synonyms that represent words your users use to describe the content.	1
19. Don't use clever phrases and marketing lingo.	1
20. Use consistent capitalization and other style standards.  <u>Justification:</u> We made the choice to use lower case letters on our navigation for a slightly more artistic feel to the site. We did, however, use those lower case letters consistently across the site.	1/2
21. Don't label a clearly defined area of the page if the content is sufficiently self-explanatory.	1
22. Avoid single item categories and single item bullet lists.	1
23. Use non-breaking spaces between words in phrases that need to go together in order to be scannable and understood.	1
24. Only include imperative language such as "Enter a City or Zip Code" for mandatory tasks, or qualify the statement appropriately. Don't give the impression that users need to do something if the action is optional.	NA
25. Spell out abbreviations, initials and acronyms and immediately follow them by the abbreviation in the first instance.	1
26. Avoid exclamation marks.	1
27. Use all uppercase letters sparingly - as they are not as easy to read.	1
28. Avoid using spaces and punctuation inappropriately - e.g. L O B S T E R S would fail in search engines.	1
<b>Revealing Content Through Examples</b>	
29. Use examples to reveal the site's content, rather than just describing it - e.g. show the top five headlines rather than simply a link to Breaking News.	1
30. For each example, have a link that goes directly to the detailed page for that example, rather than to a general category page of which that item is a part.	1
31. Provide a link to the broader category next to the specific example.	1
32. Make sure it's obvious which links lead to follow-up information about each	1

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example and which links lead to general information about the category as a whole.	
<b>Archives &amp; Accessing Past Content</b>	
33. Make it easy to access anything that has been recently featured on your homepage, for example, in the last two weeks or month, by providing a list of recent features as well as putting recent items into the permanent archives.	NA
<b>Links</b>	
34. Differentiate links and make them scannable. Begin links with the information-carrying word.	1
35. Don't use generic instructions such as "Click Here" as a link name.	1
36. Don't use generic links, such as "More..." at the end of a list of items. Tell them what they are going to get more of; e.g. "more news".	1
37. Allow link colors to show visited and unvisited states. Reserve the default blue for unvisited links and a lighter less saturated color for visited links.	1
38. Don't use the word "Links" to indicate links. Use the known principle of blue underlines.	1
39. If the link does more than simply go to other web page (such as linking to a PDF file or launch an audio file) then state explicitly what will happen.	1
<b>Navigation</b>	
40. Locate the primary navigation area in a highly noticeable place. Don't place anything above a banner - "banner blindness".	1
41. Group items in the navigation area so that similar items are next to each other.	1
42. Don't provide multiple navigation area for the same type of links.	1
43. Don't include an active link to the homepage on the homepage itself.	0
<u>Justification:</u> We chose not to implement this feature on our site.	
44. Don't make-up words for category navigation choices. Use what users will already understand.	1
45. Link any shopping cart feature from the homepage.	NA
46. Use icons in navigation only if they help users to recognize a class of items immediately (e.g. video content).	NA
<b>Search</b>	
The search feature must be able to be found effortlessly and easily.	NA
47. Place a search input box on the homepage - not just a link.	

48. Input boxes should be wide enough to see and edit standard queries. [Note: width of input boxes within tables under Netscape 4.x cannot be controlled].	
49. Don't label the Search area with a heading - instead use a "Search" button to the right of the box.	
50. The home page search should be a "simple" search (unless site is specifically designed for advanced searching).	
51. Search on the homepage should search the entire site by default.	
52. Don't offer a feature to "Search the Web" from the site's search engine function.	
<b>Tools and Task Shortcuts</b>	
The key is to carefully choose which tasks to feature as tools on the homepage.	
53. Offer direct access to high-priority tasks on the homepage (e.g. zero clicks to 'book your flight now' on an airline site).	1
54. Don't include tools unrelated to tasks users come to your site to do.	1
55. Don't provide tools that reproduce browser functionality (e.g. "make this your home page" or "bookmark this site").	1
<b>Graphics and Animation</b>	
Use graphics judiciously. Animation is best for explaining complex processes - not usually a homepage function.	
56. Don't use graphics for decoration, but to show real content.	1
57. Label graphics and photos if their meaning is not clear.	1
58. Edit photos and diagrams for the appropriate display size. It is often better to crop rather than to shrink an image.	1
59. Avoid watermark graphics - i.e. background images with text on top.  <u>Justification:</u> We only have done this on a limited area of our gallery page. The text is on top of the background images. We believe the text is readable and flows well with the rest of the page.	1/2
60. Don't use graphics to solely draw attention to an item on the homepage.	1
61. Never animate critical elements of the page, such as the logo, tag line or main headline.	1
62. If there is an animated introduction - let users choose to skip it.	NA
<b>Graphic Design</b>	
Graphic design should not be the starting point, but a final step to draw appropriate focus to a customer-centered interaction design.	

63. Limit the number of font styles, sizes and colors used.	1
64. Use high-contrast text/background colors to maximize legibility.	1
65. Avoid horizontal scrolling at 800x600.	1
66. The most critical page elements should be visible “above the fold” - i.e. without vertical scrolling on an 800x600 window.	1
67. Use a liquid layout so the homepage size adjusts to different screen resolutions.  <u>Justification:</u> We made the choice to design for an 800x600 display without requiring horizontal scrolling. We felt our website did not need to expand to display more content at higher screen resolutions.	0
68. Use logos judiciously.	1
<b>User Interface Widgets</b>	
...such as dropdown menus, selection lists and text boxes.	
69. Never use widgets if you don't want people to click them (e.g. make bullets next to text links clickable as well as the text links).	1
70. Avoid multiple text entry boxes (e.g. for passwords) in the area where people expect to see “Search” input text boxes.	NA
71. Use drop-down menus sparingly, especially if the items are not self-explanatory (and thus need more detailing than can fit in the drop-down menu).	1
<b>Window Titles</b>	
This is html TITLE element that appears at the top of the browser window.	
72. Begin the window title with the information-carrying word -usually the company name - because users scan rather than read these.	1
73. Don't include top-level domain names (e.g. com.) in the title (unless com. is part of the company's name).	1
74. Don't include the term “homepage” in the title.	1
75. Include a short description of the site in the window title.	1
76. Limit titles to seven or eight words or 64 characters.	1
<b>URLS</b>	
77. Homepages for commercial sites should follow this convention: http://www.company.com	1
78. A country-specific site should use that country's domain code.	NA
79. Try to register domain names for alternative spelling, abbreviations, or	NA

common misspellings.	
80. Following 79, redirect all alternatives to the “authorized” domain name.	NA
<b>News and Press Releases</b>	NA
81. Headlines should give maximum information in as few words as possible.	
82. Write self-contained summaries of news items for the front page - not just the start of the article following by “more...”	
83. Link the headline to the full story.	
84. A time and date at the top is enough to indicate that news is current - no need to put a time and date against all stories.	
<b>Popup Windows and Staging Pages</b>	
85. Splash pages must die! Take users directly to the “real” homepage.	1
86. Avoid popup windows. Users think they’re ads; and when they “go away” they are hard to find again.  <u>Justification:</u> We have only used pop up windows on our gallery page. We do reuse the same page to avoid multiple windows. We felt it was more effective to allow the user to see a full sized view of the gallery item with the context still visible on the screen, rather than transitioning to a new page to display the enlarged gallery item and losing context.	1/2
87. Only route users to choose their geographical location if this relates to different languages used on the site.	NA
<b>Advertising</b>	NA
88. Keep ads for outside companies on the periphery of the page.	
89. Keep these as small and discreet as possible.	
90. If you place ads outside the standard banner area at the top of the page - then label them as ads.	
91. Avoid using ad conventions to showcase regular features of the site.	
<b>Welcomes</b>	
92. Don’t literally welcome users to the site. If you must - then place it in the tag line.	1
<b>Communication Technical Problems and Handling Emergencies</b>	
93. If parts of the website are down or unavailable show it clearly on the homepage.	1
94. Have a plan for handling critical content on your website in the event of an	NA

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emergency.	
<b>Credits</b>	
95. Don't waste space crediting the search engine, design firm etc.	1
96. Exercise restraint in displaying awards won by your website.	1
<b>Page Load and Refresh</b>	
97. Don't automatically refresh the homepage to push updates to users.	1
98. When doing a refresh, update only content that has actually changes, such as news updates.	NA
<b>Customization</b>	NA
99. If your homepage has areas that will provide customized information once you know something about the user, don't provide a generic version of the content to first-time users.	
100. Don't offer users features to customize the basic look of the homepage user interface, such as color schemes.	
<b>Gathering Customer Data</b>	
101. Don't just provide a link to registration - explain the benefits first.	NA
102. Before asking for email addresses - explain the benefits and frequency of your newsletters or publications.	1
<b>Fostering Community</b>	NA
103. If you have chat or forums don't just link to that area but list actual discussion topics and provide any schedules on the homepage.	
104. Don't offer a "Guestbook" sign-in for business sites.	
<b>Dates and Times</b>	NA
105. Show dates and times only for time-sensitive information.	
106. Show users the time that content was last updated - not the computer-generated current time.	
107. Include your time zone (relative to GMT) whenever you reference a time.	
108. Use standard abbreviations, such as p.m.	
109. Spell out the month or use month abbreviations (not 01/03/2003).	

<b>Stock Quotes and Displaying Numbers</b>	NA
110. Give the percentage of change, not just the points gained or lost.	
111. Spell out stock abbreviations where necessary.	
112. Use a thousands separator.	
113. Align decimal points in columns.	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>68.5/72</b>
<b>Percentage:</b>	<b>95%</b>