



Initial Usability Assessment

*“Your Company” Web Site Review –
May 2003*

•
•
•
•
•
•
•

Initial Usability Assessment

*“Your Company” Web Site Review - May
2003*

Executive Summary

Web site reviews provide a powerful mechanism for identifying key usability problems with existing web sites. The purpose of this initial web site review is to provide a high-level prioritized usability assessment of the “**Your Company**” web site, with an associated set of high-level recommendations and new potential business opportunities.

The “**Your Company**” web site (<http://www.yourcompany.com>) was selectively traversed and reviewed against an initial set of criteria.

The intended business purpose of a site, coupled with the anticipated user communities and their expected usage scenarios, is a key factor in identifying the most critical usability issues with any given site. No direct discussions have occurred with the web site owners. However, the key business purpose of the “**Your Company**” site appears to be <informational/e-commerce/interactive/etc.>.

While several issues were found, the following represent the key concerns with the current site:

- **Homepage Impact** – The homepage provides little real content. This requires users to click deeper into the site to find additional information, which some may not do. Since the homepage is the most traversed page of any website, more real estate should be allocated to positioning the value of “**Your Company**”.
- **Navigation** – The top-level navigation of the website is atypical from most websites. Consideration should be given to making this structure more standard.
- **Information Architecture/Content** – Key products and services of “**Your Company**” are hard to find. The organization of the information is inconsistent and confusing. In many cases, information of interest is well below the fold. Also, external search engines are not finding the “**Your Company**” site consistently.
- **Presentation/Readability** – The website does not display without horizontal scrolling on an 800x600 screen resolution. The color scheme of the site and small font size makes the text on the site very difficult to read.
- **Stability/Performance** - The site does not render consistently across web browsers and platforms. At least one page took a considerable time to download. Several

missing links were uncovered.

Different levels of a web site review are possible. This initial usability assessment provides a non-comprehensive summary of initial findings on the “**Your Company**” web site. The “**Your Company**” web site was reviewed without any direct information from the site owners as to the anticipated user communities or the expected usage scenarios the site must support. While substantive items were uncovered in this initial assessment, a full assessment would most likely identify other usability issues and additional business opportunities.

A full assessment, in collaboration with the site owners to develop an understanding of the site owner’s current and planned business objectives, would drive a comprehensive review against those stated business objectives. This deeper review would provide an overall prioritization and impact statement of the items found, recommendations where feasible, and identify potential areas of follow-on redesign or enhancement work.

Usability Assessment Background

Using the web as a mechanism for businesses to communicate their products and services is a key marketing and sales tool in today’s technology based environment. Having corporate information easily available on the web provides significant advantages over previous methods. The web provides broad reach of dynamic content to many people at a minimum cost. With its 24x7 availability, coupled with self-service features, a web site can significantly increase customer satisfaction by providing needed information any time day or night. The web also offers significant opportunities around co-marketing and business-to-business automation. All of these advantages ideally translate into increased revenues and/or reduced costs.

The web, however, also opens the door to significant usability issues that can drive users away in frustration. Many experts have documented the explicit and hidden cost of poor usability and how that dilutes anticipated improvements [e.g., *Forrest, April 2002, “Packaged Apps Fail The Usability Test.”*] Key factors in poor usability include things such as hard to find information, overwhelming complexity, inconsistency in the interface and its operation, poor performance, and instability. Any one of these reasons can result in a user leaving the site without completing the task they had intended – representing a potential lost revenue opportunity.

Making web sites usable is smart business. The return on such investment has been proven to increase sales, reduce customer support costs, reduce training costs, and save development costs by making corrections early in the development life cycle.

“More than 83 percent of Internet users are likely to leave a Web site if they feel they have to make too many clicks to find what they’re looking for, according to Andersen’s latest Internet survey.” (Arthur Andersen, 2001)

“You can increase the sales on your site by as much as 225% by providing sufficient product information to your customer at the right time. In our recent research, we found that the design of product lists directly affected sales.” (User Interface Engineering, 2001)

Without considering usability and scenario-based design, many of the supposed benefits of the web are eroded. To compound this, without establishing metrics and measures, the business may have little insight that this is occurring – users simply abandon the site in frustration.

•
•
•
•
•
•
•
•

Web site reviews can provide a powerful approach to significantly improving the effectiveness and usability of an existing web site. By applying a set of usability techniques, expert reviewers can assess a web site against a set of 'rules' or heuristics. These results ideally are compared to the overall business purpose of the site and its anticipated user communities. The results can then be prioritized, alternative recommendations made, and updates and/or rework applied to the site.

Several levels of web site reviews are possible – ranging from an initial high-level review such as this, to an in-depth usability assessment. An in-depth usability review could include an assessment of the site against industry 'de facto' web standards, search engine optimization recommendations, end user usability testing, metric definition, baseline measurements, and/or the identification of new innovative business opportunities which leverage the web and its supporting infrastructure.

Initial Assessment Purpose, Scope, and Methodology

The purpose of this initial web site review is to provide a high level prioritized assessment of the “Your Company” web site, with an associated set of high-level recommendations.

The website was selectively traversed to hit a representative set of key pages. Not all pages were reviewed and not all content and behaviors of selected pages were assessed. No discussions have occurred with the site owners to confirm the assumed business purpose and anticipated user communities of the site. The review focused on doing a broad review of the web site, hitting most areas and looking for key items of concern. An associated set of high-level recommendations is also provided.

Initial Usability Assessment Findings

It should be noted that there are several positive aspects to the site. The focus of this assessment, however, is on areas for improvement so the bulk of the document addresses these topics.

Site Positives

- A brief list of key Site Positives as a result of the website review.

Homepage Impact

- A list of specific Homepage Impact issues found as a result of the website review.

Navigation

- A list of specific Navigation issues found as a result of the website review.

Information Architecture/Content

- A list of specific Information Architecture and Content issues found as a result of the website review.

Readability/Presentation

- A list of specific Readability and Presentation issues found as a result of the website review.

Stability/Performance

- A list of specific Stability and Performance issues found as a result of the website review.

Initial Recommendations

The following provides a summary of the key recommendations from this initial assessment. They are listed in order of anticipated benefit. This prioritization should be validated against the business goals of the site, however.

1. Consider redesigning the homepage layout and graphics to provide more content “above the fold” so users do not have to scroll down the page to find important navigation and information not immediately visible. A ‘portal-like’ home page would be an ideal framework for showcasing the information provided by “**Your Company**”. **HIGH**
2. Consider redesigning the overall layout of the website (left hand navigation, bottom navigation, structure, 800x600 appropriate displays, etc.) to better reflect common web conventions. **HIGH**.
3. Consider showcasing the services offered by “**Your Company**” more directly and more prominently. **HIGH**.
4. Consider improving the search engine optimization (SEO) for the “**Your Company**” website to increase traffic. **HIGH**.
5. Consider an alternative color scheme with greater contrast to increase the overall readability of the website. **MEDIUM**.
6. Correct the identified broken links and misspellings found on the website. **LOW**.

Next Steps

To take this initial assessment to the next level, discussions would need to occur with the site owner to understand the key business drivers of the site and the anticipated user communities. This information, along with a more comprehensive set of criteria, would then drive a deeper, more complete, review of the site. The findings of that review would again be prioritized and a set of more detailed recommendations would be made around those findings.

In some cases, there may be recommendations that cannot be reasonably made within the context of the existing design. In these cases, a recommendation to redesign all or some portion of the web site might be made. If a redesign of the site or a portion of the site were required, an iterative design approach would be used to arrive at a revised design.

Also, while an expert review typically identifies several areas of improvement, running actual usability testing sessions with real users is the most reliable way to ‘prove’ that the site indeed has met the objectives of the site and is considered highly useable. Such usability testing sessions can be planned and executed, if desired.