

Optimising the user experience of your website

by John Waddington of Fen Digital

Why is user experience a critical success factor?

On a website the user experience is highly compressed, typically between 30 seconds and 5 minutes.

The first 5 seconds is decisive as to whether a user engages with your site or clicks away. They will make a quick subconscious assessment of whether they:

- perceive your site to be relevant to their goals
- can achieve their goals quickly and easily
- trust the brand enough to engage with your company.

And because it's so easy to click away to discover another site, the need to optimize the user experience is all the more important.

In fact, Jerry Gregoire, former CIO at Dell is quoted for saying: "The customer experience is the next competitive battleground"

A good website builds trust

By showing users that if they click a link they get rewarded by finding the information they expected and which supports them achieving their goals, you build up their trust in doing business with you.

It's like meeting a straightforward person who doesn't throw surprises or let you down.

It's about "doing what it says on the tin".

Planning a website around users' needs

Before calling in a website designer to create a new website it's a good idea to plan the range of information that your site will need to feature in order to:

- explain clearly your product or service
- give potential customers the reassurance that you are the best company to do business with.

Have clear objectives for your website

Start by working out what your specific business objectives are for the website. Just having a website because you think it's about time you had one is not a formula for success. Each page you propose to have should have a clear objective – if it doesn't, bin it!

Scenario planning

Next, consider who your priority audiences are for the site and what information they will need to see on the site to answer their questions and persuade them to call you or buy your products.

It's a good idea to get other people to help you brainstorm the content for your website, as it is very difficult to think objectively about users' needs if you are too close to the business.

Information architecture

When you have a list of the key pieces of information needed, you should prioritise them and then plan the optimum 'information architecture'. That's the term in the usability field for the structure of the information on your site and which page links to another.

Armed with this information, you are ready to approach your website designer with a clear brief about which sections you need and the content within each. The task for your designer is to structure the site and present the pages in a way that gives easy access for each audience group to the information they need, preferably with only one click from the home page.

Avoiding information overload

There is a strong temptation to put too much on the home page, in which case you risk putting visitors off through information overload. The role of the home page should be to set the scene and expectation for the site and to provide easy paths to specific information – it is not intended to be a piece of narrative.

Optimising the user experience

If your website doesn't appear to be bringing in new business as much as you'd hoped, there are several possible explanations:

- There is insufficient demand for your product – website optimisation isn't going to help with this!
- Potential customers can't find your website because it is not ranked in the first couple of pages of Google
- People arrive at your site only to be disappointed because it doesn't meet their expectations in terms of brand, relevance to their goals, or usability

If your site is well ranked but visitors are clicking away from the home page without investigating the site, then it's time to look at how you can optimize the user experience.

Top tips on how to optimize your site

The good news is that it can often be simple things that may be causing users to abandon your site at the home page. Here are some things to try:

- Install Statcounter (visit www.statcounter.com) which is a free visitor tracking system that enables you to study your visitors' paths through your site and understand at which point they are leaving
- Brainstorm with people outside your business what information they would need about your type of product or service and see if your site falls short on content
- Get comments from other people on whether your site looks professional and easy to use – if not, you may need a re-branding exercise
- Does your home page suffer from information overload? Too much content competing for attention will quickly turn visitors away
- Are the navigation links self explanatory? Will it be clear to new visitors what information they will get if they click on a link?
- Is your text written in a simple, user focused way? If you use too much jargon or management buzzwords, your company will convey a self important image – a rapid way to turn off potential customers.
- Are the pictures on your website representing your products or services to their best advantage? Crisp, clear images do a great deal to inspire confidence in the company and product.
- Do you update your site regularly? If so, you give a positive message about your company as forward looking and communicative. But if visitors to your site always see the same tired old text and images, there's no reason for them to come back.



Website optimization has other benefits

The good news is that the more user friendly you make your website, the more it is likely to do well in the search engines, so you benefit all round.

For more advice

For more advice, please contact John Waddington of Fen Digital on **01638 731547** or by email to <mailto:seo@fendigital.co.uk>.

We offer a range of website optimization services that can help you attract more visitors and get more of them to convert into customers.