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People Profile: Michael Gorrell

Editor

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some similarities. These similarities allow the interface designs and features to feel familiar to its users. Simple search boxes, the layout of the pages, the ability for the user to easily predict the site flow and identify where key functionality will appear; these pages are designed with the user in mind. They were also designed with the knowledge of what has worked on other sites — with what users have come to expect.

It is hard to believe that Websites have been around for fewer than 15 years. If you look back it is easy to see that usability was not always the driving force behind those early sites. They were created by engineers (often for engineers). How things have changed. The Web is central to modern society, and perhaps more importantly, a major driver for commerce. A successful Website is a necessity for most businesses, from bricks and mortar companies to online search and advertising companies built “on the Web.” A result of this is that usability has become an essential element of Web design, and therefore successful business.

Jakob Nielsen, usability expert, says:

Usability is defined by five quality components:

Learnability: How easy is it for users to accomplish basic tasks the first time they encounter the design?

Efficiency: Once users have learned the design, how quickly can they perform tasks?

Memorability: When users return to the design after a period of not using it, how easily can they reestablish purchase?

Errors: How many errors do users make, how severe are these errors, and how easily can they recover from the errors?

Satisfaction: How pleasant is it to use the design?

To a large extent, familiarity is the key to Website usability. First and foremost a Website must be easy — and for the first-time user, the Website must be easy to learn.

When Being the Best isn’t Better

Convenience is an important factor for humans. Sometimes it’s the most important factor. Michael Jensen and the late William Meckling, economists who wrote about human behavior in The Nature of Man, describe humans as “Resourceful Evaluative Maximizers.” If applied to users conducting information research, this model would suggest that users would be quick to evaluate how well a site meets their immediate needs, and make a decision based on the maximum benefit whether to continue on or to stop and explore a different site. Translation: if the site is overly complex, foreign or “clunky,” users will move on to something that’s easier, even if it doesn’t have the “best” material.

Typical search engines are often criticized for providing results without necessarily providing answers. However, because they are so easy to use, a searcher is more inclined to return again and again. They are maximizing convenience but not necessarily quality.

Usability of Search

People often think of Searching as a specific activity. Certainly in traditional research and library settings “searching” is thought of as a skill that can be learned with different techniques that can be applied. While this may be true, for most mainstream users, Searching has become intertwined with general Web browsing. People find the sites they want to browse via searching their favorite Internet Search Engine. What that means is that the search experience that is most usable and familiar, with the widest set of users, is the one they get from Google, Yahoo and MSN. Alexa.com data shows that these — Google, Yahoo, and MSN — are the most common Search Engines for users worldwide. These sites share some common attributes and provide instant feedback for the user by:

• Being fast. Response times are sub-second.
• Being relevant. Results are returned in order of relevance.
• Providing evidence and context. Each result includes a snippet of text that provides an opportunity for the user to validate relevance and to preview what they will get if the result is selected.
• Providing a similar layout. These search sites share a general layout; results in one column, and sponsored ads in a second column.

Therefore, it can be argued in order to be perceived as a usable Search Engine, a service needs to have similar attributes of the “big 3” search engines.

How Research Databases Differ

The workflow step that commercial search engines provide in a research process is the first one — the initial search. If successful, the user will be taken away from the search engine on the second click. The first click is “search” and the second click is the link to the result’s site.

Research databases have a wider role in the research process. Most times these sites will provide that first step for the user — the initial search. However, many databases need to provide the user with a full experience from search, to retrieval, viewing, exporting/emailing, etc... These additional workflow steps introduce extra challenges that the commercial Search Engines don’t have, and they introduce new usability issues that sites need to consider. These may include: What are the most familiar ways to allow users to narrow their search? How do sites allow users to “collect” articles of information? What are the typical ways that a user would deliver a collection of articles to themselves? What type of vocabulary should be used on the interface? How do sites allow users to discover an array of different but related content?

One Service’s Redesign Efforts

There were many tactical goals for EBSCOhost 2.0, but the overarching theme was to improve the site’s overall usability. Balancing user expectations with the powerful (and sometimes unique) features was the challenge. From creating a simplified basic search screen, to making features available to users as they made sense, to anticipating the need for the next click, to taking advantage of the latest Web technology; the focus was on creating a search experience that was familiar and useful. As a result, EBSCOhost has undergone a major user interface redesign. With input from dozens of focus groups, usability studies, continued on page 26