

# Designing for Superb Web Usability

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The process of web design is a convoluted one - a combination of design and valuable content. A key factor in a well designed site is a characteristic called usability. Usability simply stated is how usable a site is. It may be attractive yet difficult to navigate. The content may be invaluable but the appearance dull or harsh on the eyes. All of the components of sound web design impact on the usability quotient of a site. The important thing is to consider each part: navigation, content, design, layout, graphics, add-ons in the context of the user who is most likely to come to the site, whether regularly or infrequently.

## Identify Your Primary Users

The first step in developing usability is to figure out who the majority of your users will be. If you are creating a health site that features medical advice, articles, interaction, quizzes and the like you would look at the potential health consumers. Depending on your content, the target population of consumers could range from teens seeking advice on growth and development, drug prevention, teen pregnancy and so on to elderly users seeking advice on various gerontological issues and concerns. On the other hand, if you are designing a site to feature newly released motion pictures, your target group would be broader - encompassing a wider sector of the general population. Once you have identified your target group of users, you can begin to consider the best persona and metaphoric look for the site. What would appeal to this group of people? What style, colors, content, graphics and so on would keep this group coming back again and again?

## Center the Focus on the User

It's important to center the design process on the anticipated users of a site to make the web site efficient and satisfying. If you want them to come, and to do so regularly you must design the site with care and consideration. To begin the process **three key factors need to be articulated:**

- the goals of the organization, business or individual who is proposing the site
- the usability goals or objectives
- the contexts that the site is intended to be used in.

Usability should be part of each step of the design process. When you first sit down to write out your site objectives and draft the design, keep the user clearly in mind. Step by step, focus the design on those people who will interact, read and engage in your particular site. Most major businesses and organizations will gather data from a pilot group of targeted users on their opinions, needs and suggestions for use.

If your navigation is confusing, your content dull and your site takes forever to download usability goes way down. Your site should reflect and accommodate how users like to use sites. Knowledge of how humans interface with a computer screen in a logical natural way is a big part of distinguishing what is usable and what is confusing. A focus group or select beta testing with potential users can help you recognize the potential flaws and glitches before you launch the site for public viewing. Better yet, do this before you even PLAN the site. Some companies go as far as testing competitor's sites at the same time to compare the performance and ease of use of their own.

## **Creating the Useable Site Interface**

How users interface with your web site is a critical consideration in determining usability. [Jakob Nielsen](#) suggests that a quality interface is:

- Easy to learn.
- Efficient.
- Easy to remember.
- Free of errors.
- Satisfying and pleasing

In essence, make the website helpful, simple and informative to use. Most users love simplicity, but simplicity with style. Take the guess work out of a site's functions but don't make it boring. Keep it clean yet interesting. Make it savvy but fully functional. Remember, the average user spends eight seconds deciding if your site is worth exploring. You have that much time to catch their interest. Use the time well by making their first glance a worthwhile one. [Derrick Story](#) of WebReview.com suggests that you ask yourself:

- Is it efficient?
- Is it intuitive?
- Is it supportive?
- Is it engaging?

You may not think you have time to consider usability. It obviously makes the design process a whole lot longer and may seem like just another headache. But, good designers know that it is the core of high quality design. If you're going to do it, you might as well do it right. Too many companies go through redesign after redesign just trying to attract more users. They butt their heads up against the proverbial wall again and again. It's worth the time and care needed to get it right the first time. Usability is the key!

### **Links to Learn More!**

[Usable Web](#) - A jam packed site filled with hundreds of links related to making web sites usable.

[Cost-Effective User Centered Design](#) - Excellent article on professionally designing a site to clearly focus usability on the site user's needs.

[The Usability Lifecycle](#) - Jakob Nielsen's informative article about the entire process of client centered design and usability assessment.

[Useit.com](#) - Jakob Nielsen's site devoted to making sites clear, usable and used!

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